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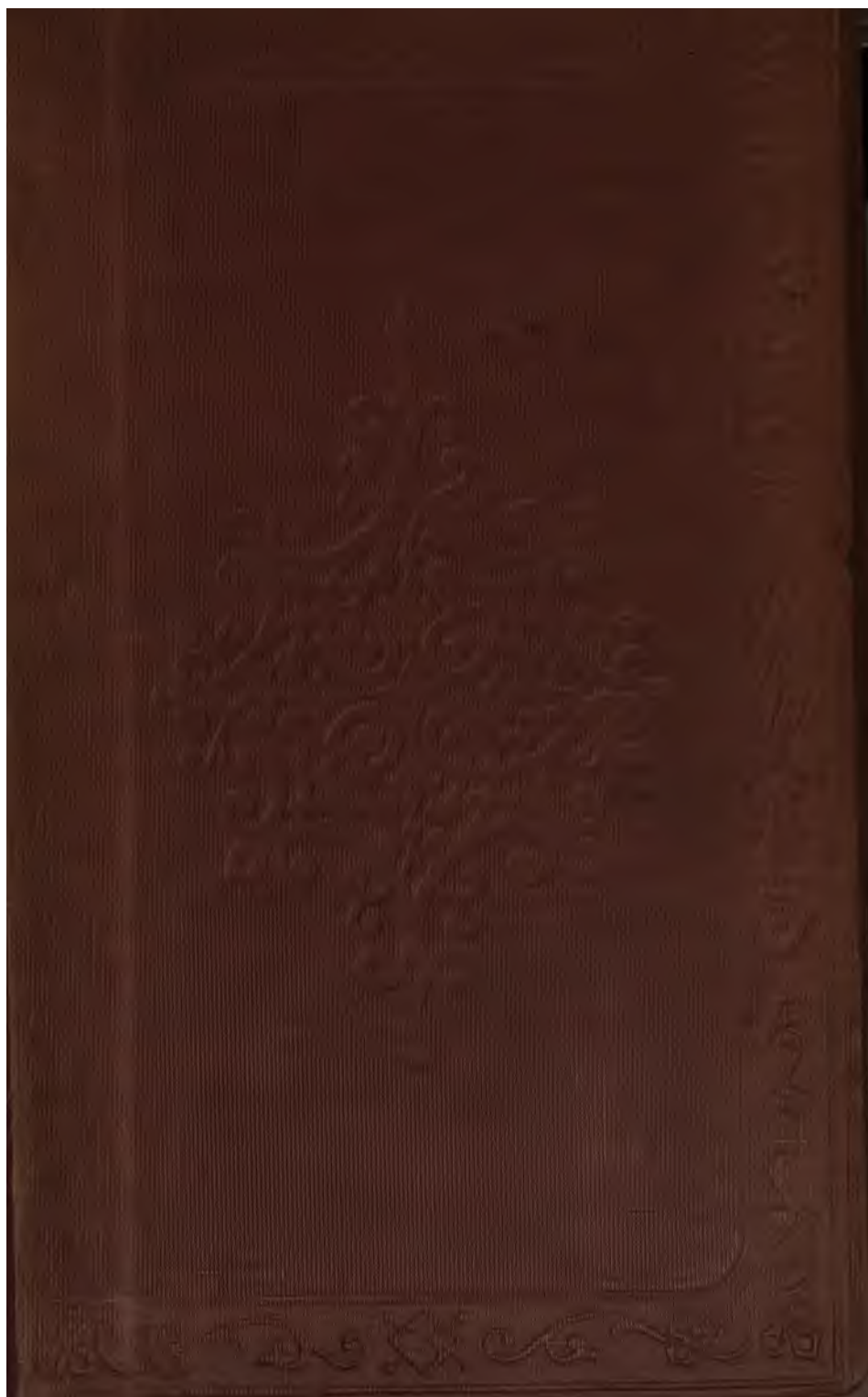
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THE HALF SISTERS.

A Tale.

BY

GERALDINE ENDOR JEWSBURY,

AUTHOR OF "ZÖE."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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C. WHITING, BEAUFORT HOUSE, STRAND.

TO
JANE WELSH CARLYLE
AND
ELIZABETH NEWTON PAULET

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED,
BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE FRIEND,

GERALDINE ENDSOR JEWSBURY.

Green Heys, Manchester,
February 14, 1848.

THE HALF SISTERS.

CHAPTER I.

ON a bed, scantily hung with faded print, lay a woman apparently in extreme suffering. A girl about sixteen stood over the fire, carefully watching the contents of a small pan; at length it seemed sufficiently prepared, and she poured it into a tea-cup, and approaching the bed where the sick woman lay moaning and restless, she addressed her in Italian, and endeavoured to raise her up; but the woman shook off her arms and hid her face in the pillow, like a fretful child endeavouring to escape from its nurse.

"Come, Mamma mia," said the girl, "I have made you something delicious, something you like very much, won't you eat it, now I have got it ready with my own hands?"

"No, no," said the sick woman, in a querulous tone, and burying herself still more among the clothes, "I

won't be teased; let me lie still, and then we will go and see him."

"See whom?" asked the girl.

"Him whom we came to see—came from Italy to see, who will take care of us, and never let us leave him. He will be glad to see us; it is so long, so long since we parted, and he has never seen thee. I have nursed thee and kept away from him till thou wert grown a beauty. I have kept away all these years to surprise him at last, when thou wert grown tall and beautiful. I should have died when he left me but for the hope of this; and now that I am so near him I feel frightened; I dare not get up and go to him, I should die with too much joy. All yesterday I kept thinking, perhaps he will come here; but I see he had no presentiment to bring him; I must go to him. See," she continued, drawing a pocket-book from under her pillow, "read there, read there, I will have no secrets from my child now."

"Is there any money in it?" asked the girl.

"Yes, all I have," replied the mother, "but no matter, he has plenty, he always used to give me plenty, we shall want nothing now, and we shall have no more sorrow."

The girl looked anxiously at the contents of the pocket-book, with which she had never before been intrusted; she found some old letters, a lock of light hair, an address written upon a card, and about five shillings in money.

"Is this all?" asked she, anxiously.

"Yes, yes, but he has plenty; if this pain in my head would only cease, I would get up; but I cannot."

"Will you not take some of this nice arrow-root?" said the girl, coaxingly.

"No, no, I tell you, but I will see *him* presently." She then fell off into a doze, moaning the whole time, and clutching the bed-clothes with her long, thin fingers.

The little inn where they were staying was very noisy—bells were ringing incessantly. There were callings for different individuals from the top to the bottom of the house, the tramping of heavy feet along the passage, and up and down stairs. The window of their room looked on to the stable-yard, and they could hear the noise of the horses' feet, and the whistling of the ostlers; the smell of the stables ascended; and an all-pervading odour of tobacco and spirits made altogether an association of sound and scent most irritating and oppressive. The sick woman had sank into a stupor, but still seemed obscurely sensible of the annoyances around.

The girl first put the little room to rights, and then sat down at the foot of the bed with a cup of milk and a slice of bread. She had not sat long, before the doctor, who had been sent for early in the morning, entered. He was a grave hard-looking man, with cold indifferent manners; and the appearance of poverty about the room did not tend to give him any additional blandness. He stepped at once to the bed-side, and rousing the patient, proceeded to question her without much gentleness.

"How long is it since she was herself?" he asked abruptly of the girl. She did not understand him.

"I mean," said he, "is she usually in her right senses?"

The poor child, shocked and stunned by this horrible suspicion, which entered her mind for the first time, could not reply.

"Come, come, I cannot wait here all day," said the doctor, "I have other places to go to. Have you perceived your mother growing childish? because, though there is some fever, I don't see that she is exactly delirious."

"She is not so sensible as she was at home; she has seemed changed since we came here—she will not get up nor be dressed. I don't know what to make of her."

"Ah well, young lady, it is as well you should be prepared for the worst; your mother will never be herself again, in my opinion; she seems quite weak in her intellects, and if you have any friends, you had better communicate with them, for you are too young to be left with such a charge. Just now she is overcome with fatigue and excitement, but she is in no sort of danger. I will see her again to-night, and send her a little medicine, which you must give her regularly. Let her sleep as much as she will, and keep her quiet. Good morning to you."

As the door closed after him, the child sank on her knees beside the bed, sick with fear. A horrible future had just disclosed itself to her—her girlhood was strangled

by this sudden fearful anxiety, and the life curdled in her heart. All that had struck her as strange in her mother's conduct, and which she had forborne to question, attributing it to sorrow, was now revealed in its full significance. All the complaints she had uttered about being watched by enemies, and which had excited her daughter's sympathy, now seemed a horrible confirmation of her fears; and when she recollected all her mother had that morning told her of the vague motives which had brought them from home, and thought of the slender means that remained to them, her heart trembled and died within her.

She sat thus overwhelmed for several hours, during which she became laden with as many years. At length, the heavy necessity which had at first stunned her, acted as a stimulus; besides, in the deepest sorrow there is always a reaction towards hope. People who are called to suffer much have always great elasticity of heart, for without that it must give way and break.

"After all," thought she, "the person named in the address may live near here, and may help us. Any way, he will put us into the way of getting home, and once there I can work."

Her nature began to recover from the despondency in which she had well nigh been overwhelmed. She began to rise to the surface of her sorrow, instead of being plunged, like lead, beneath it.

CHAPTER II.

IT was assize time, and the town of L—— was filled with an inroad of visitors, witnesses, and barristers; every inn was occupied, and more than occupied; and very fastidious people at other times were now glad to find accommodation in very second-rate places.

The landlord of the “Blue Bell” was lounging at the door of his small tavern, when he was accosted by a dashing-looking youth, followed by a porter carrying a leathern portmanteau. The landlord felt instinctively that he had been round the whole town before coming to him, and therefore thought without dismay on the one small back three-cornered chamber, which alone remained untenanted. He knew it was the only one to be had in the place.

“Happy to see you, sir—town very full—beds worth a guinea a piece. Yes, sir, yes, by the most singular good fortune the parties for whom I had orders to reserve it are unable to attend—only heard an hour ago, or would have been snapped up fifty times. Walk this way, sir; a charming room, you see!—a little small or so, but a beautiful aspect.”

The new comer shrugged his shoulders. "Well, well," said he, "I suppose there will be a time when one ought to be thankful to have a place in Purgatory. Will that window open?"

"Yes, sir, that top pane swings back on a hinge, and will let in a charming current of fresh air."

"For Heaven's sake admit it, then, for I am half stifled. Have you a sitting-room at liberty?"

"Why no, sir, I am sorry to say they are all engaged; still, if you would not object, I think I could accommodate you. There is a gentleman in the 'Sanded Parlour,' who, I am sure, will be very glad to admit you to a share of it. He is a most respectable man—comes here very often—I have known him for years. He is the manager of a circus, and has a travelling company; he has just been to make some new engagements. He opens next in Birmingham. Sometimes I've had half the troop, horses and all. We would be glad of your company in the bar; but the 'Sanded Parlour' is more comfortable."

The stranger yielded to his destiny, and allowed himself to be conducted to the "Sanded Parlour." A man, apparently about forty, a stout, coarse-looking, and rather pompous individual, in a dark green cut-away coat, with a bright full stock, and showy pin, stood with his back to the fire-place.

"Mr. Simpson," said the landlord, entering, "I have taken the liberty to assure this gentleman that you will allow him to join your company, as there is no other room at liberty."

“Certainly, sir, certainly; pray make yourself at home. Assize time is like misery for making one acquainted with strange bed-fellows—*room-fellows*, I should say—but it’s all a matter of no consequence.”

The stranger bowed rather haughtily, and taking up a newspaper which lay on the table, desired the landlord to let him have a grilled fowl and tea directly.

The manager of the circus put his hands in his pocket, and began to whistle to himself as he looked out of the window; and the young man sat turning over the old softened provincial newspaper, whilst the sand crackled and grated under his feet every time he moved, in a way to try the nerves even of people not particularly fastidious. He kept up a true Englishman’s silence, and endeavoured to turn his share of the room into his castle, by surrounding himself with an impassable moat of stiffness and reserve.

The tea and grilled fowl made their appearance at last. The landlord placed them on the table, but did not offer to withdraw, in spite of the surprised and impatient looks of the young man.

“Mr. Simpson,” said he, addressing the first occupant of the room, “perhaps you will give me your opinion as to what I had best do in a little matter that has just occurred. When I went out of the room just now, a young girl, who arrived here with her mother three days ago, came to me in the bar,—not crying, but quite pale and desperate like. She is from foreign parts, and it was as much as I could do to make out what she said, though she does speak English after a fashion. It seems her mother

came over to England in search of some relation, I suppose, but I cannot just make out who or what. She had been in a queer melancholy way, and since she came to England she has got worse, and has now got a nervous fever or something ; and this young thing, her daughter, came to me to tell me what I suspected, namely, that their money has run short. She put these gimcracks into my hands to sell, and asked me to help her to some work. I could not help feeling sorry for the poor thing. Her mother will never be any sort of protection to her, for the doctor who was sent for to her, says she is quite childish. I feel very sorry, for I had a daughter just that age myself once, but I cannot keep them here when their money is all done ; a man must live by the fruit of his labour, and I cannot afford to give mine away. I thought, perhaps, you, sir, or this gentleman, might understand her tongue, and make out whether she has any friends."

"What does she look like?" said Mr. Simpson.

"She is rather dark complexioned. I thought at first she might have been a play-actor, for she made me understand by her looks and actions I don't know how. If you happened to have a place open in your company now, her fortune would be made."

The younger stranger had paused from eating, and had put down his paper to listen to this conversation. It was an adventure he had not calculated upon, and he began to get stoical to the gritty floor and the grinding of the table and chairs when they were moved.

"Can we see her, landlord?" said he, "perhaps we may make out something."

The landlord retired, and in a few minutes returned, leading in a young girl of about sixteen, in a black silk dress, high to the throat, and the folds confined with a band round the waist. She had the unformed undeveloped figure of a girl, but her face was full of beauty—large liquid grey eyes, that looked with an intent and earnest meaning beyond her years; a profusion of hair, of that blueish black, so rarely seen, was twisted round her head and fell in tresses over her neck; her face was deeply flushed as she entered the room, but there was a composed reserve in her manner.

"Tell these gentlemen," said the landlord, "all you have been saying to me, and may be they will help you."

The young girl seemed to nerve herself by an inward effort. The younger stranger addressed a few words of Italian to her—her eyes flashed with pleasure—poor child, it was as if she had already found a friend! She spoke quietly and slowly, and told him that her mother, who had for several years been in a feeble state, both of body and mind, was haunted with a desire to come to England, and had hoarded up every farthing she could get; but that her uncle, with whom they lived in a small sea-port, had always watched her carefully to prevent her leaving the house; that he died a few weeks back, and then her mother seemed suddenly to rally her faculties and bodily strength,—disposed of

the property her uncle had left; took a passage for herself and daughter in a sailing vessel to England—to see a friend, she told her daughter, who would provide for them both; but that, since leaving the vessel, she had become more imbecile every day, and now, from fatigue and excitement, was too ill to leave her bed. The child's voice slightly quivered as she said this; but she recovered herself, and said she was very anxious to get some work, as there would be much to pay before she could get back home.

“What is the name of this friend of your mother's, my poor girl?”

The child handed him a soiled and crumpled card, on which was written,

“Phillip Helmsby,

“Messrs. Helmsby and Co.

“Iron Masters, Newcastle.”

He handed it to the landlord, who shook his head.

“Phillip Helmsby,” said he, “has been dead these two years, his wife and daughter have left these parts, and the Works have passed into other hands.”

“What does he say?” asked the girl, anxiously.

The stranger repeated it in Italian. The child clasped her hands in an agony of despair—she did not know herself how much she had hoped.

“Very good, indeed!” said the manager, “that attitude is very effective. Do you know any one else?”

She shook her head, and seemed quite stupified with what she had just heard.

"Tell me what I must do?" said she, appealingly to the stranger.

"Faith, that's more than I know," said he, in English, to his companions. "What are we to do with the poor thing? there seems nothing wrong."

The landlord, who had been considering for some time, said at length,

"Well, it's a queer business, but my mind misgives me terribly. When Phillip Helmsby came home from foreign parts, on the death of the old gentleman, there was talk of some beautiful lady he had left behind, and it *was* said by some he would marry her, but he took the partner's daughter and a mine of money instead; that girl has a trick of Phillip Helmsby's face,—I could not think who she reminded me of. I have seen him many's the time as he passed through the town. It would not surprise me if the poor thing upstairs had given them the slip at home and come to seek him. Ah, Phillip was a wild one before he married, and there's no saying what he had to answer for."

Whilst the landlord was piecing out his romance, Mr. Simpson was coming to a resolution. Clearing his voice, he turned to the stranger:

"Tell her," said he, "that I am manager of the Birmingham Circus—a man well known, and, I may say, respected. I want a female who can act in dumb show; and if she will agree to come with me, I will give her ten shillings a-week and teach her her business beside. She shall be a regular member of my company, and draw her salary weekly; it's more than she's worth now, but she

will improve and be useful, and she may work it out then. I don't want to be hard on her, as she will have her mother to keep. She may do on ten shillings, as I shall find her in stage clothes, and those Italians can live on nothing."

When the offer was repeated to the girl she could scarce find words to express her gratitude, but the eloquence of her looks and gestures quite satisfied the manager that he had made a good bargain.

The stranger took out his purse, and counting out five sovereigns, he put them into her hand, telling her their value in English money.

"By what name may I pray for you?" said she.

"Conrad Percy," said he; "and you, how are you called?"

"Bianca Pazzi," replied she; "there is no danger of my forgetting you," and raising his hand to her lips, and curtsying to the others, she left the room.

"Give the poor thing her trinkets back, Mr. Landlord," said Percy, "and tell me what her bill is likely to be."

The landlord in the warmth of his heart had the moment previously been on the point of declaring he would charge her nothing, but this offer from one who seemed able to afford it was too great a temptation. Still he tried to keep up the appearance of a virtue.

"As good deeds seem the order of the day, I will let you off very easy, though, as I said before, beds, just now, are worth gold, and there has been no end of running about after these people—still right is right, and

I can do a kind thing as well as my neighbours, so we will say fifteen shillings for both board and lodging."

Conrad threw down a sovereign, and bidding the landlord give her the difference, ordered his own bill, saying he should start early the next morning.

When left alone with the manager he said,

"I feel confident, sir, that every care will be taken of that poor girl, to see she comes to no harm; and if ever she needs a friend there is my card. I assure you I feel deeply interested in her."

Conrad was very young, and there was something pleasant to his sense of manliness as well as his good nature in standing forward as the friend of a pretty little girl.

"My good sir," replied the manager, pompously, "you are very young, indeed; almost a boy; and at your age, men ought to be all faith in the good side of human nature; but I know the world, and have left off expecting any good from it. Still the girl seems a good girl enough, modest and all that, but there's no saying what she may turn out,—women are such jades! Bless you, I could tell you such stories,—but that's neither here nor there; the feelings you have shown do credit to your heart, and I will keep my eye upon her, so that if she goes wrong it shall not be for want of the best of good counsel. If ever you come to Birmingham I hope you will inquire for me. I am pretty well known; my company is most talented, and my stud of horses wonderful. I always seek for genius wherever I can find it, and do justice to it; and no doubt our young protégée will be-

come illustrious in time; but it takes a deal of time to polish up a reputation, and there is much to learn, for ours is a profession, sir, to which people must be born, as one may say, and yet they have never done learning it."

Mr. Simpson would willingly have treated his hearer to a dissertation on "High Art," but luckily for Conrad the landlord entered with his bill; he was glad to escape, and, taking up a bed-candle, desired he might be called in time for the early coach. Mr. Simpson stretched out his hand with an elaborate friendliness, and said, "Farewell, my dear sir, rely on me that our interesting protégée shall have every justice done her. We shall see each other again, and talk of this remarkable evening; good night, and farewell, my very dear sir."

He looked at the card as soon as he was gone, and read—"Conrad Percy, St. John's College, Cambridge."

CHAPTER III.

IN an extremely neat sitting-room, without one particle of taste visible in the arrangement of the grave substantial furniture, sat the wife and daughter of the late Phillip Helmsby of Newcastle, engaged on a large piece of household needle-work. A book-case, filled with books of uniform size and binding, stood in a recess by the fire-place; but none were lying about. An engraving of the Princess Charlotte, and another of her husband, hung against one of the walls; some ornaments of old-fashioned Dresden china, little Cupids with blue scarfs, and pots of roses, stood on the chimney-piece, marshalled at equal distances on each side of a plain time-piece. All the chairs stood in their lawful places against the wall; none of those idle, lounging, pretty inventions for being comfortable, encumbered this singularly prosaic-looking room. A brisk fire in a shining black grate was the only thing that did not seem subdued down to the level of the presiding spirit of decorum. A blotting-book, and an inkstand upon it, stood on a table in the centre of the room; and at a small work-table by the window

sat the two ladies, with a large wicker pannier full of "*mending*" between them.

The elder lady was a plump, composed, grave matron, with a pair of large round black eyes, which looked on every thing and saw every thing, but had the peculiar faculty of giving no indication of what was passing within. She was dressed with scrupulous exactness, in a black silk gown, and a net cap with lilac ribbons; her complexion was rather fair, and her features delicate, yet it would be difficult to say whether she was good-looking or not. The younger figure was a slight drooping girl about fourteen; her hair was braided under her small and beautiful ears; she was not exactly pretty, but she had soft lustrous eyes, and all her features expressed delicacy and sweetness. She appeared a docile, gentle creature; and an expression of earnest, though immature intellect, shone on her countenance. On seeing the two together, the first impression was of wonder, how characters so different could be mother and daughter. After being for some time diligently occupied with her work, the young lady exclaimed, with vivacity: "There, thank Heaven! this tedious work is finished at last. I have taken the last stitch, and now one can go out; it is quite a sin to be in the house such a beautiful day."

"Alice!" said her mother, in a dry, precise tone, "how often am I to tell you that those strong expressions are highly unbecoming in a young woman; it is extremely wrong in you to have such a distaste for useful occupation. What have you to expect all your

life? If you marry, and become the mistress of a family, you will find yourself woefully deficient; but, indeed, what prudent man would ever think twice of such a flighty young woman? I have long felt uneasy at your way of going on: every day more and more neglect of your duties, more and more dislike to the sober-minded condition of life in which you are born. Your life will be domestic; you are neither to be a fashionable woman nor an authoress; therefore your excessive devotion to books and accomplishments will bring no useful results, but only unfit you for your duties, and fill your mind with fancies. I quite looked forward to your coming home from school to be a comfort and companion to me; but I am sorry to say I find you neither one nor the other."

"Dear mamma!" said Alice, with the tears springing to her eyes.

"Yes, my dear, you may look, and you may say 'dear mamma,' but what I tell you is true. You do all I tell you, no doubt; but then you appear to take no interest in any thing; you seem to care nothing for the house, nor for my troubles with the servants; you don't see after them; and though you do just what plain work is wanted, you do nothing as if you liked it. And as to being a companion to me, I might as well talk to a stone—except, indeed, that you make a contemptuous face, and look as if I, your mother, bored you to death! And then, to see how you behave to the people who come to the house. There is good Mrs. Jones, for instance, you almost insulted her only last night."

"Because," said Alice, "she is both vulgar and impertinent : perhaps I could have stood that, but it put me out of all patience to hear the malicious construction she put on Miss Gally's marriage."

"Well," said her mother, tartly, "and what gives you the right, I should like to know, of setting yourself up in judgment against your elders, picking and choosing what you like, and what does not meet your fancy? By the way, I paid eightpence for a letter for you this morning—who was it from?"

"My old governess, Mrs. Hunt," replied Alice.

"It is very good of her to take so much trouble about you," said her mother, in a slightly discontented tone. "Where is it? Let me see it."

Alice handed the letter to her mother, feeling, she hardly knew why, that she would rather not have shown it.

"Well, it is a very nice sensible letter; and it is all quite right for Mrs. Hunt, who keeps a school, and whose bread it is, so to speak, to talk to you about improving yourself, and keeping up your studies; but I wish now that you are from under her care, she would say something about your duty of attending to your domestic concerns, and your useful employments. You have done with your school-books now, and though I do not object to your practising an hour a day—nor to keeping up your drawing, if you would only make it practical, and paint me some screens for my drawing-room, or a cabinet for the library, or a chess-table, or something that would be really useful—yet you spend all your

time in sketching from nature, and never making them into finished drawings by mounting them on card-board —so that one might have a portfolio to show one's friends; the other night I was quite ashamed to have nothing but your school drawings to show the vicar's lady, and you refused to let her see what you have been working at all by yourself. And then you sang, as I never heard you sing before, as if we were all fools together, and not good enough for you to keep company with."

Alice remained quite silent, for she felt there was some justice in her mother's complaint; in a few minutes, however, she said,

"You told me to remind you about calling on Mrs. Haslitt; would not to-day be a good day, as it is so fine?"

"That is not so badly thought of," said her mother; "but mind you make yourself look very nice, for you are growing quite a sloven, and Mrs. Haslitt is a most particular person. I shall ask her where she gets her groceries; I shall deal no longer with Bradkin, his tea is very bad."

Alice left the room, and soon returned duly arrayed to her mother's satisfaction, who speedily joined her in all the dowager dignity of a Chantilly veil and a velvet cloak, trimmed with sable.

CHAPTER IV.

PHILLIP HELMSBY, the father of both Alice and Bianca, was the son of an extensive iron master in the neighbourhood of Newcastle. When quite a young man, his father sent him to Genoa on business connected with the house, and whilst there, he became passionately enamoured of a beautiful Italian girl, the daughter of the friends in whose family he lived. He endeavoured to obtain her hand in marriage, but both families raised a storm of objections—*his* father would not hear of a Papist for a daughter-in-law, nor would *her* father consent to her marrying a heretic. Whilst the heads of each family were thus contending on points of orthodoxy, the young lovers took matters into their own hands. The girl, a passionate Italian, had loved the young Englishman before she saw any sign of its being returned, and she had wearied the Madonna with prayers that the heart of him she loved might become hers.

Prayer is the great consolation of men in religion ; but it is a mercy that the hearing and granting of it is placed in the hands of the Highest, and quite beyond

man's control,—for who can look back on his past life without trembling, when he thinks on the mad and fatal petitions he has offered up, and reflects on what must have been his destiny had they been granted!

The prayer of the young Italian was apparently heard,—for the one she loved declared his love for her, and in the wild, almost fearful, joy she felt, she made offerings at all the shrines of the Virgin in Genoa.

When the opposition to which we have alluded was raised, she hesitated not, but gave herself to her lover without the sanction of either her parents or the church. She loved him with a passionate entireness which prevented her feeling any sense of shame or degradation—she fled from her home and joined her lover at Leghorn, whither his father's mandate had removed him. They lived together for about a year and a half, nobody taking much heed of them. She was a wild-hearted gifted creature, with all good qualities except *common sense*—the only virtue that in this world brings any sort of practical reward along with it. She lost sight of herself altogether, idolising him, and all that belonged to him—seeing nothing as it really happened to be, but every thing as it ought to have been.

When a woman loves with an engrossing passion, and is by nature entirely ungifted with coquetry, it is ten chances to one but that in a very short time she becomes a great bore to the man on whom she bestows it. The *abandon* becomes in time an insupportable burden, for she throws herself on her lover with all the confiding weight of helplessness.

The Italian was too much engrossed with her own affection to consider the appearance and becomingness of things;—the relations between men and women in this world will not stand too much reality being heaped upon them. A morbid love of power in the shape of cruelty lies at the bottom of every human heart; and when either a man or woman is invested with absolute dominion over the happiness of another, that very instant, “like tares sown by the Evil One,” comes the inclination to tyrannise.

This young Italian had beauty, genius, generosity, and a whole mine of precious things in her character, not scientifically balanced, but poured out in lavish profusion on her English lover, whose slower nature seemed to provoke her to still more abounding love, in order to quicken him to her own intensity. She was utterly unconscious of the magnitude of all the sacrifices she had made, and lived on, enwrapped in a fiery element of love and devotedness.

At the end of about eighteen months his father died, and he was re-called to England to settle the affairs of the partnership.

The parting was vehement and passionate on both sides; he left her, promising to return in a few months and carry her to England and make her his wife—and he was quite in earnest at the time he promised; but, though he would not own it, yet in his secret heart he had begun somewhat to weary of this passionate love. He was an Englishman after all, and loved quietness.

Arrived at home, all the complicated affairs of the

partnership had to be gone into. The three months were of necessity lengthened into six—into twelve. The real work that now devolved upon him made his Italian life seem dreamy and childish;—and after all, getting money does seem to the natural man of more importance than love, however desperate. Several long journeys had to be taken, and his acquaintance with the Continental languages devolved them upon him.

Love can only thrive in idleness, and he was overwhelmed with business from morning till night; whilst the skill necessary for carrying out extensive operations, the calculation, the foresight needed, and a large number of workmen to control, all contributed to blot out his Italian dream.

Then, too, he felt the incongruity there was between the smoky dingy town in the neighbourhood of which he was obliged to reside—the stolid, hard, all-engrossed men amongst whom he was thrown; men with no idea of literature beyond a newspaper, or the monthly part of a novel, which they bought just as much because it seemed a good amount for their shilling as for the tale—and the beautiful country, elegant environs, and the lovely creature he had left behind. Whilst he shrank from inflicting such a lot upon her, he regretted that a mad passion and the facility of Italian life had seduced him into entailing such an embarrassing tie upon himself—then, too, she was a Catholic, a word of abomination as great as that of Socialist.

The memory of his mistress became gradually divested of its most winning attributes; he began to fancy her a

passionate, fantastic, wayward child, who would bring ridicule upon him; in short, he had already had as much love as one man can stand in a lifetime, and had begun to feel the charm of getting money.

She, on her part, used to write him passionate love-burning letters—all her days were passed in dreams of his return, and there was one *secret* which she kept to tell him until he wrote to fix the joyful day for rejoining her. She had never brought him a living child; when he left her, she was not herself aware that there was a prospect of her becoming a mother; when she did become conscious of it, she did not tell him, lest the disappointment which had once before been theirs should happen again; and afterwards, she determined to keep her secret till he announced his return.

That announcement never came;—before twelve months had elapsed, he had grown weary and impatient of his position, and determined to make an end one way or the other. He opened his case to his elder partner, a kind-hearted man, much esteemed for his sound judgment and solidity of character.

No satisfactory result ever comes of either giving or taking advice. What in one man would be a wise and natural mode of conduct, in another, even in similar circumstances, is forced, hard, and altogether unsuitable. So every man would do well to follow his own sincere instinct; that which in his inmost soul he feels it right to do. When a man asks advice on a point of right or wrong, there is a *warp*, a *bias*, towards which

he desires to be impelled, and he asks counsel for the sake of lessening his own responsibility. So it was with Phillip Helmsby.

His partner was too much a man of the world to be scandalised, but he thought it his duty to persuade him to give up a dangerous connexion, likely in all ways to compromise his respectability; and Phillip Helmsby ended by fancying himself a victim to necessity, and endeavouring to think that there was as much kindness to her, as consideration for himself, in what he was about to do.

He wrote, to tell her that he could not bring her to England:—it was a letter just to drive the person mad to whom it was addressed, whilst a third party seeing it, would have declared it an excellent, kind, reasonable letter. There it is! If there be one thing more utterly insupportable than another in this world, it is to receive reasonableness and kindness at the hands of one from whom we expect *love*, given as a *substitute* for love. Poor Theresa, not being a reasonable woman, never attempted to reply to this letter. A handsome sum of money was paid to an Italian banker for her use, and her brother, who resided in a small Italian seaport, took her to live with him. Her child was about two months old; when the letter came, it had been named Bianca; and now her whole idea seemed to be to bring it up carefully and to carry it to England to claim its father, when it should be old enough. This idea kept her from destroying herself in the first frenzy of

her grief—but her faculties gradually declined; the memory of her desertion died away; and the idea of taking the little Bianca to its father filled her heart alone.

Phillip Helmsby knew nothing of all this; perhaps, had he done so, he might have acted differently—but there is no telling.

As it was, in about six months after he had broken with the Italian, he lawfully married his partner's daughter, with a large fortune; a very well-conducted young lady, and one not at all likely to weary him with any passionate demonstrations; but she was a clever housekeeper, and kept his establishment in excellent style.

He became a patron of the arts, and filled his house with pictures, statues, and objects of *vertù*. Although his wife was proud of having her house a show-place, yet that hardly counterbalanced the plague of keeping so much "ornamental furniture," as she called it, in order. She was not an unkind woman, but she had an intensely prosaical heart; however, as we said, Phillip Helmsby had had enough of passionate love, and he thought his wife a very sensible woman.

They had only one child, Alice, and in her the father's heart was centered. She stood beside him like the best part of his life; she seemed to him the ideal of all he had ever dreamed, himself "in finer clay;" the child, a sweet endearing little thing, was passionately attached to him; and this *legitimate* tie kept his mind from ever wandering towards poor

Theresa. He did not live long, however, for he died rather suddenly, when Alice was about twelve years old.

By his will, his wife and her father were constituted his daughter's guardians. All his collection of books, pictures, &c., were sold and dispersed, except a few of inferior value, and some books which she thought might be useful as her daughter grew up.

The Works, too, were disposed of, and Mrs. Helmsby and her daughter went to reside in a large manufacturing town, where she had some relations.

CHAPTER V.

IN spite of all that has been said about the happiness of childhood, of its being a recollection of the better world from which we came forth, it is to many a most purgatorial entrance into life ; and to them, a return to a state of childhood would be more dreaded than any Hindoo or Egyptian transmigration.

The childhood of Alice had not been a happy one. There had been no positive unkindness ; but children do not understand the value of what we call solid comforts ; kind words, smiling looks, sympathy with their little pains and pleasures, are all they understand ; a harsh word or chiding tone conveys more pain than a grown person can understand.

Alice had always been a singular child, and her father's death had thrown her altogether in the hands of persons quite unable to understand or train a child of her disposition. She was not clever ; never said or did any of those precocious wonderful things mothers are so proud of repeating ; she was always a quiet, thoughtful, dreaming child ; she never desired companions of her

own age, but delighted in playing by herself; she would sit for hours under the shadow of a tree, watching the green light stream through its branches; she would leave any play she was engaged in to creep to the window-seat in the nursery, there to watch the sun set, firmly believing it was the gate of heaven; she would sit gazing at the changing light, and the large stars suddenly starting into sight on the confines of the dim orange-coloured mist, and the dark, clear, crystalline blue of the coming night, and the moon growing gradually more clear as the daylight died out, till her large blue eyes dilated with awe, and she grew frightened at being alone, and yet did not dare to venture out of her recess, but sat with a sort of pleased terror until her nurse broke the spell by carrying her off to bed; nor would she sleep unless the blinds were all drawn up, in order that when it was moonlight she might see the quiet mysterious light pour a flood of radiance through the room, and the shadows of the tall trees tossing about on the walls.

As she grew older, she was haunted by a sense of hidden meaning in all she saw, and was baffled and perplexed in her weak endeavours to understand more than was seen. The common tasks she was set to learn, seemed to have a spirit she could not seize, and this bewildered her and kept her from attaining the common cleverness of most children; but there was a constant striving after something not set down, which the lessons did not express, but seemed to contain.

When she was at play, her doll-bonnets of leaves, her chains of rushes, dust gardens, and pebble houses, were

really clumsy compared with those of her companions; but there was a feeling, a striving after some meaning she could not express, which made a difference between her work and theirs.

One fine moonlight night, her nurse coming softly into the nursery, overheard her praying to the *moon* "to take her up there, it looked so beautiful;" and when the orthodox nurse, much scandalised, told her she was worse than a heathen, she said she "had always been told to pray for what she wanted, and then God would give it her, and she wanted to live in the moonlight or the sunset for ever!"

When she grew a little older her mother sent her to a boarding-school, in the hope she would grow more like other children. The regular employment and constant bustle of being with twenty other young people, seemed for awhile to deaden her vague dreamy fancies—the spirit of emulation was roused, and she became very ambitious to excel her companions; but when, after a few years, she had worked her way to be considered the first in the school, the commonness and insignificance of what she had done suddenly struck her; she felt ashamed of having been so much excited in pursuit of a prize for attaining a knowledge only a little less imperfect than that of her companions; she felt disgusted and dissatisfied; a sense of baffled effort depressed and distressed her; and none of those around her could understand the vague, undefined, restless aspirations that filled her heart. No one could speak a word to direct her towards an object worthy of her.

Her mother withdrew her from school before she was quite fourteen, in order that she might learn to be useful, and not get her head stuffed too full of book-learning, which never did a woman any good yet.

From the specimen we have given our readers, they may judge of the extremely unpromising aspect of her condition at home. Indeed, whether she or her poor unknown half-sister Bianca were in the worse position for all that regards real help and training for the lifetime opening before each, it would be hard to say. God is good and life is strong.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was not till five days after her meeting with the manager of the circus, that Bianca and her mother arrived in B——, on the top of the heavy stage. Her mother was quite unable to travel; and they had been detained at the inn, till what between the doctor and the expenses of their prolonged stay, Bianca's reserve fund of five sovereigns was reduced, when she had paid the coach fare, to one. The landlord, however, gave her some refreshment for the journey, and a bottle of home-made wine for her mother; and also recommended her to the care of the guard, who promised to give an eye to her when they got to B——.

In this world men cannot resist the temptation of making money when they have an opportunity, or turning aside from a bargain; but there is a great deal of good-nature for all that. The landlord's conscience smote him for taking any thing from the poor friendless child, but it was in the way of his trade, and he could not help it; still he tried to justify himself, by

giving her some scraps of food for the journey, and a recommendation to the ostler, a friend of his, at the inn where the coach stopped, begging him to see her into honest lodgings: so, on the whole, perhaps Bianca fared quite as well as if the landlord of the "Blue Bell" had strained his generosity by going contrary to his habits, and had let her off without further charge than the bill already discharged by Conrad;—for we all know that when we feel constrained to do a good deed rather beyond our strength, our soul is, as it were, half choked in the attempt to swallow it, and, instead of feeling nourished and refreshed, and experiencing that sense of satisfaction which is said to be the accompaniment of good deeds, a fit of splenetic humour is generally the actual result, a sort of sulky protest against our conscience, for being so *exigéante*, and there is not a scrap or a remnant of good-nature left for the accidental need of the occasion. So, as we said, it was quite as well for Bianca, considering she was a child and a stranger, and going unprotected to a large town, that the landlord's generosity expanded in what was to cost no money—he took some trouble, and great credit for it, as it was ever after to figure as one of the benevolent incidents of his life.

They arrived without accident at B——, and where the coach was to put up for the night. The guard put Bianca and her mother inside the coach, and told them to sit there till he could attend to them.

Bianca, who had entertained a vague idea that as soon as she arrived at B—— all her difficulties would

be at an end, felt her heart sink at the sight of all the strange faces and the crowded streets, which she contemplated from the coach windows as the weary minutes passed away. Her mother had been persuaded to come to B——, by the assurance that he she sought was gone there; and now she was eagerly looking at every passer by, in the hope of seeing him. At length a vague terror seized the hitherto brave-hearted girl; she seemed suddenly to realise the forlorn, desolate state she was in; she fancied her only acquaintance, the guard, had gone away and forgotten her; and what between fright, fatigue, and the reaction of the excitement of the last few days, she gave way, and burst into tears. Her mother did not perceive it; she was watching them light the lamps in the street.

At length the guard came to the door of the coach, saying:—"Well, did you think I had forgotten you? I have been rather long; but, come, come, we must have no crying, that will never do; it never helped a body—you must keep up a good heart. See, this is the ostler you brought the letter to—not that he can read it, but I have explained all about you, and he thinks, if so be you won't mind mounting a few steps, he has a room in his own house you could have. Come, wipe up your eyes, and let us be walking. I'll see you safe myself before I leave you."

The guard had been refreshing himself with hot brandy-and-water, and he was in a very comfortable, good-natured frame of mind. There are so many more accidental things in this word than premeditated ones!

He flung away the end of his cigar as he spoke, and lifted Bianca out of the coach.

“So this be the young woman,” said the ostler, holding his lantern to her face, “and that there her mother, I take it. Well, I reckon, if they can make themselves content, we can take them in. Where are their traps?”

Swinging the small trunk upon his shoulders, he began to stride along; Bianca, the guard, and her mother following. After walking some distance, they came into an old-fashioned narrow street, out of which they turned into a court, and at the top of the court they stopped before a tolerably decent house; the door stood half open, a clean, tidy-looking woman, in a blue bed-gown and a check apron, was laying a cloth on a round table, and a frying-pan was on the fire, steaming and spluttering forth savoury odours. She seemed disconcerted at the sight of so many.

“Well, missis,” said the ostler, entering, “do you think as how we can do with these here two ladies to lodge up stairs? Mr. Smith, the ‘Blue Bell’, sent them to me.”

The woman looked very cross, but said: “I reckon they may, if they’re not too grand; but a decent single man would pay better, and be only half the trouble. But lor! Mr. Simms, who thought of seeing you here? I am sure, if they are friends of yours, we will be happy to take them.”

The good-looking guard was the ostler’s grandest acquaintance, and his appearance softened matters wonderfully.

"I am sure they can be nowhere better than with you, ma'am," replied the guard.

Placing her frying-pan on the hearth, she took up the candle and showed the way up-stairs. The room to be let was at the top of the house ; it contained a single bed with blue check curtains, a couple of chairs, and a small table ; there was a fire-place, and on the mantle-shelf stood, by way of ornament, two rude plaster images, painted as gorgeously as Indian idols ; there was a pot of flowers in the window-place, and the walls had not lost all trace of whitewash ; on the whole, there was an air of comfort and decency about it, not common in that class of houses.

"Now, young woman," said the ostler, "I don't want you to be imposed upon by no means ; if you conclude to take this here room, you will pay eighteen pence a-week ; and, if you think it too much, you are free to seek another, but any way, you had best stay here to-night."

"You might go further and fare worse," said the guard. "You had best make a bargain, eighteen pence is not out of the way."

"I want to take no advantage, it's what we get for it."

Bianca, who had great difficulty in comprehending the strong Warwickshire dialect, signified she would be glad to stay there, and, at the direction of the guard, paid the first week's rent in advance ; on which the woman began to have a better opinion of the speculation, asked her to sit by her fire down stairs, and

inquired what she would like to eat. A small packet of tea and sugar being amongst Bianca's stores, she made her a comfortable cup of tea; and in less than an hour Bianca and her mother had taken possession of their new abode, and were both sleeping as soundly as fatigue could make them.

Bianca was up betimes the next morning, and after dressing her mother, and getting breakfast, she asked the woman to direct her to Mr. Simpson, the manager of the circus. This did not seem to augur too well to the woman, who looked very suspiciously as she gave the necessary information.

Fortunately, she had not far to go, and without much difficulty she found the house where he and his wife lodged. With a beating heart she knocked at the door, and was admitted to where they were at breakfast.

"Well, my girl, so you are come at last, are you? How comes it you are so long after time? It has been very inconvenient this delay. I have had to keep back the new piece, and if you had been one day later I must have filled up your place, and then what would you have done?"

Bianca explained that her mother's state of health had made it impossible for her to travel sooner.

This, the manager knew was very likely; but he had got so much into the habit of not believing the excuses of any member of his troop, that, from mere force of habit, he said—

"Well, well, no doubt you have plenty of excuses; I

have only to do with the fact ; you are after your time, and you understand that, if I chose, I should have the right to cancel your engagement ; however, you must mind better another time ; recollect, always, I am punctual to a second. Nothing to be done without it in our line."

He spoke in a sharp, bullying tone, not from any unkindness or ill temper, but because he had got into the habit of shouting both to his people and his horses; and he was obliged to be peremptory in his business. Poor Bianca was not accustomed to hearing harsh tones, and not understanding all he said, began to fear she had committed some terrible crime. Her deprecating look pleased Mr. Simpson, and restored him to the perception of the excellent bargain he had made.

"This is the young woman I spoke of, my dear, so highly recommended to my care by my distinguished friend Mr. Conrad Percy, when he was my guest at Newcastle.—Have you another cup of tea in the pot? I dare say it is some time since she had her breakfast."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Simpson, taking no notice of her husband's hint, "she is, is she? Well, you know best whether you are going to have a dumb girl in all your pieces, or else you must teach her to talk, for nobody can understand what she says—for my part I think you have made a foolish bargain. That Dupréz would have done very well, if you had only managed her; and you will find out your loss; but it is no business of mine."

Mrs. Simpson, who was one of the corps of female

equestrians, was a tall well-formed woman, with a hard bold face and a defying pair of black eyes: she had a slight toss with her head, and she looked as if she could get up a storm at a moment's notice. Ever on the watch for the smallest slight, at the least provocation she would burst out in words as pelting as hailstones. She was fully impressed with the dignity of her position as manager's wife, and did not incline with any favour towards the striking-looking foreign damsel, whom her husband had picked up in a way she could not, or would not, understand.

"Now, my girl," said Mr. Simpson, as he emptied his last cup of tea, "it is quite time for us to be going. You will recollect," turning to his wife, "that there is no rehearsal of the 'Thessalian Virgins' to-day, this 'Dumb Girl of California' will take all the time; but you will be in time to ride with the troop. They never form as they should do except you are with them, my dear."

"You are mighty flattering all at once," said his wife, tossing her head.

As they went along, the manager tried to impress upon Bianca the great favour he was conferring in giving her such an arduous part for her *début*. To which Bianca listened in profound silence.

Bianca did not know what a circus was; and the sudden change from bright sunlight into a close dim place, the light struggling through the canvass roof and the spaces between the boards, was quite bewildering; and the smell of the horses, the lamps, the saw-dust,

and the peculiar odour that pervades all theatres, nearly stifled her. The greater part of the troop had already assembled.

"Come, now ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Simpson, "are you all prepared to begin? This is the young lady I have been expecting, and, as she is a foreigner, who cannot speak our tongue, I beg to recommend her to your good offices—she takes the part of the Dumb Girl."

The business of rehearsal now began in earnest. Bianca remained standing where she was, till she should know what she had to do. At first she felt afraid of the horses, but as nobody else seemed to have that idea, or to think such a thing possible, she became gradually reconciled to their vicinity, and she kept quiet, much wondering what she would have to do in all the bustle that was going on. At last the manager came to her.

"Now, my good girl, attend to me. That man there," pointing to a dissipated-looking youth, in a ragged shirt and a plaid stock, with a very scanty front, but who had an indescribable air of jaunty self-complacency, "that young man there is your lover; you must watch beside him when he sleeps, and defend him against an assassin; you must try to awake him, but, as you cannot speak, nor scream, it is only natural you should not succeed, but you will only be the more distressed. Now just think how you would feel if it were a real sweetheart in such a position, and you have only to do accordingly."

Bianca, little as she knew it, had been intended by nature for an actress. She got directly into the spirit

of what she had to do. Her ineffectual attempts to arouse her lover, who slept with a most supernatural soundness, her agony and her struggle with the assassin were so earnest and natural, and her attitudes so effective, that Mr. Simpson was lavish of his praise. Then there was a skirmish, and Bianca had again to rescue her lover, and finally get killed herself, falling under the horses' feet. It was a long confused business altogether, such a tumult of shouting and swearing, falling into confusion and beginning again, going over the same thing a dozen times, until Bianca, who had eaten nothing since early in the morning, was nearly fainting with fatigue and exhaustion. However, the rehearsal came to an end at last, and the manager, who was really good-natured, and in a very good humour with her besides, sent out for some porter and a crust of bread. Then, as the day was fine, a grand procession of the horses and the troop round the town, preceded by the band, was the next business. The troop, all dressed as much like natural men and women as their wardrobes permitted, riding two and two, made a touching tableau, emblematic of the fraternal love and amity which pervaded the body. Mr. Simpson brought up the rear in a lofty phaeton, drawn by four beautiful spotted horses, and Bianca, smartened up to meet his notions of Italian costume, was seated beside him.

Bianca was stunned, bewildered, and ashamed of her conspicuous position, and of the wonder and notice they obtained from the crowd ; but she had no sort of alternative, all those around her seemed to take it as a

matter of course, and before the ride was over, the people she was amongst seemed the realities, and the people in the streets through which they passed appeared the show.

At length all came to an end, and Bianca, stupified and weary, was at liberty to go home, with strict charge to be very punctual at rehearsal the next morning.

Bianca was not sixteen when she became one of the circus troop. She had never received any direct instruction or education in her life, except a little English from her mother, and a little reading and writing from an old priest in the village. She was a Catholic, as all Italians are; but no sort of extraneous good had been instilled into her, nor artificial notions of any kind; she had been left to grow up exactly as it pleased Nature. None of her faculties or feelings had developed themselves when she left Italy; she seemed as closely shut up and unawakened, as a flower that is still imprisoned in its calyx, and has not yet shown a trace of its rich leaves to the sun; she had come to no sort of self-consciousness; and the constant attendance she was in upon her mother, the spectacle of her dejection and suffering, had damped all her youthful spirit, and prevented her ever knowing the glee and joyousness which is the normal state of childhood. She was grave and still; it was almost painful to behold the unnatural thoughtfulness and prudence with which she attended on her mother, and kept their little household in order; it was the spectacle of rosy youth becoming colourless before its time by contact with the cares of life. She loved her mother intensely;

and seeing her always sad, she had felt that all gaiety was out of sympathy—and children are capable of sympathy with those they love, to a degree never found either in lovers or friends in after life. With the natural egotism of sorrow, her mother had kept Bianca constantly with her; it was the only solace she had, and she was not aware how she was blanching the most brilliant and sunny portion of her daughter's days. Her own fine intellect, which had been a rich untilled field, became weaker and weaker, till, as we have seen, it ended in almost childishness. The shock that came on Bianca that fearful day beside her mother's bed, when the knowledge of her helplessness came in its full extent upon her, quenched the last spark of youth from her heart; henceforth, the burden and anxiety of providing for the passing day came upon her; she was face to face with destitution, and with nothing but her own hands to stave it off herself and her mother. A strong and indomitable resolution—an energy that would shrink from nothing, was then first roused; it was the strong bass note of her nature, the finer harmonies were not yet unloosed. She had no idea of vanity, or of getting admiration, or of displaying herself in any way; her sole idea of the circus was, that it was the means of earning a certain number of shillings, on which she might support her mother; it never occurred to her whether it was a mode of life she would like or dislike. She had only the fixed idea that she must do her best in all she had to do, in order that this mode of subsistence might not be closed against her.

Bianca had never been at any sort of theatrical representation in her life, and a few nights before her own appearance she took her mother to see the performance. The preparation behind the scenes was so coarse and unpleasant that Bianca had felt very little curiosity to see the result produced.

But she was startled by the change she found in all things; the dark, dirty circus, lighted up with brilliant gas lights, seemed to glow with bright and radiant colours: the coarseness of the decorations was not perceived; in the gorgeously and picturesquely attired heroes and heroines of the scene, she could not recognise the dingy, sallow, slovenly individuals whom she met at rehearsal; the horses had always been noble creatures, but now they seemed only in keeping with their riders; the effect was brilliant, and the tawdriness and paltriness of the dresses and trappings did not appear when seen from the proper point of view. Bianca felt a glow in her heart; and as the horses and riders disappeared one after the other, dashing behind the mysterious pink satin curtain which hid the exit under the stage, she could hardly believe it led to nothing better than she had seen in the morning.

The *idealism* of her profession had struck her, and henceforth it was not the unmixed drudgery it had been.

The night of her own *début* came at last; she had not felt much anxiety about it, for the *necessity* that was upon her allowed her very little alternation of hope or fear. When, however, she stood for the first time before

the blinding lights and the oppressive presence of so many hundred human eyes, her whole being seemed turned to stone ; she would have run away if she could only have moved. The people applauded her, but that only frightened her more. Two energetic words from Mr. Simpson broke the spell that was on her, and restored her faculties ; she felt she *must* do her work. In a few minutes she became engrossed in what she had to do, and gradually forgot all about the audience. The piece went off very well, and Bianca did her part admirably, with the exception of a few mistakes in the business of the scene, very excusable in a novice. She had got over her fear of the horses, and her "*death*" was very effective, and brought great applause ; which gave her great satisfaction, because she felt her livelihood was now secured. She had proved herself worth her wages.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER Bianca had learned to ride, and could speak English a little better, she was promoted to more important business. She began to feel a fascination, even in that low grade of her profession, which carried her through hardships, annoyances, and drudgery. There was a constant excitement and sense of adventure; even the dead heavy reality of her life at home was surrounded by a fictitious atmosphere; it was only one scene in a drama, of which she did not yet know the *dénouement*. A sense of her own powers gradually made itself felt, and there was a pleasure in the exercise of it. At first when she went to the circus she had no idea beyond doing her best; but a spirit was soon roused within her, what she had to do in each piece became a reality for the time, and she flung herself into it with all her force. Many were the jeers she received from the rest, for giving herself so much more trouble than was needed.

Accident had thrown Bianca into this line of life; but we are obliged to confess she continued in it from choice.

Within a few days of her arrival in B— she sought out a Catholic priest (her mother had become exceedingly devout since her desertion), and Bianca instinctively looked for her priest as for a friend to whom she might go for counsel in any perplexity. There was a Catholic church not far from their lodging, and the priest, a benevolent looking old man, soon felt a strong interest in both the mother and daughter. He was much shocked at Bianca's mode of life, and exerted himself to get her some more creditable employment; after a few weeks he succeeded in obtaining the offer of a place in a shop, and a lady of the congregation promised to supply her with as much needle-work as she could do. But in the first place Bianca could not sew; and in the next, unfortunately, the charm of her profession had begun to work. She could not make up her mind to leave it. She felt a blind instinct that obliged her to continue in her present course, even at the risk of offending the good old priest, who had taken so much trouble for her. The benevolent lady with her plain work, turned her back at once on Bianca, and would have nothing more to do with her, considering her lost to every chance of respectability; but the old priest, though sadly grieved, thought she would all the more need his warnings and watchfulness, so, although he looked very grave, he still continued his visits to her mother, and after a while, finding Bianca regular at her duty, and in all respects conducting herself extremely well, if he did not become reconciled, he at least ceased to try to persuade her to leave her way of life, and contented himself with watching

that she got into no mischief. Mr. Simpson, to do him justice, kept a vigorous hand over his troop, so that nothing flagrant was carried on. It certainly was not a particularly exalted school of refined morality; they all belonged to the lower orders, and their general conduct was the average of that of people of their class. The respectable public who went to see them, considered them *en masse* as dissipated disorderly vagabonds, whom it would not have been creditable to know, or altogether safe to admit to the neighbourhood of their silver spoons. Separated from them by a glittering row of gas-lights, seeing them only dressed up in whimsical and tawdry costumes, the frequenters of the circus hardly considered the actors as human beings; content with being amused when they went, they did not even look for any morality more exalted than that they should abstain from burglary or disturbing the peace of the neighbourhood; the actors, in their turn, lived in a world of their own; and if they were dimly conscious of the degraded estimation in which they were held by the respectable daylight inhabitants, they repaid it by supercilious indifference; nobody feels degraded in his own eyes by his profession, be it what it may; they were a community amongst themselves, and all of much the same opinion as to the importance of their business; and on the whole felt themselves rather superior to those who came to see them.

Bianca kept chiefly to herself—not from any sense of superiority, but because no one in the troop attracted her. People can only take in from surrounding in-

fluences what they have an affinity to receive. At first her reserve was attributed to pride, and was bitterly resented. Though not one in the troop, except the riding-master and Mr. Simpson, cared one straw whether they exchanged a word with her or not, yet they did not choose any one to set up to be better than the rest, and they set themselves to punish her for it in the thousand ways which a community has of making an individual miserable, against whom it has a dislike. Without knowing how she had incurred it, Bianca found herself the object of every sort of covert malice and persecution. No one would speak to her; she saw nothing but mocking looks, sneers, and, as far as they dared venture, of practical ill-treatment. One night, in the ring, she was thrown from her horse, in consequence of a malicious trick, and was carried, bleeding and senseless, from the circle. Mr. Simpson made rigid inquiry, but the offence could not be brought home to any one. This was rather a fortunate incident, in the end; for Bianca showed so much real good-nature, such an absence of all wish to get any one into trouble on her account, that the tide was turned in her favour. Her progress from a martyr to a heroine was as summary and reasonable as those transformations usually are. It was owned that she had never taken advantage of her favour with the manager to do any one else an ill turn. The women found she never interfered with their lovers, or laid herself out to attract admiration; but, on the contrary, was ready to help them in manufacturing of their finery; she had a natural genius for

costume, and could make up picturesque dresses out of the most shabby materials, which was a most convenient talent. And then it was discovered that she supported her insane mother, and that it was to hasten home to her she had always hurried away from the circus; and, finally, as to her promotion to the best business in the pieces, it was agreed on all hands that she took so much more pains and trouble than any one else was willing to do, that no one could wonder if she succeeded better; besides, there was the mollifying circumstance, that her salary was not raised in proportion, for Mr. Simpson was not a generous man, and he insisted on her working out the "over-payment," as he called it, which she had received before she became useful. Now, all these good qualities, and all these reasons for not ill-treating, had existed from the beginning, but her companions were now in a humour to do her justice; their ill-nature had had its fling, and was appeased, and they were now disposed to go as far in the opposite extreme. As soon as she was able to reappear in the circus, Bianca found herself received with enthusiasm by her companions. The man who was the actual perpetrator of the trick which had so nearly proved fatal, had been denounced by the rest, glad of a scapegoat, and dismissed the company. Henceforth, Bianca's path was smooth; a sort of consideration and pre-eminence was tacitly awarded her, and her only difficulty was to solve the daily problem of supporting herself and her mother on twelve shillings a-week; that, and her busi-

ness at the circus, was more than enough to employ her, and keep her clear of the innumerable cabals, intrigues, and *tracasseries* going on around her.

As to Bianca herself, she had a hidden source of life and comfort she would have revealed to no one, and which was the secret of her singular discretion, and indifference to all the admiration that offered itself: it was, the memory of the graceful, handsome Conrad, who had appeared like an angel to her in her deepest need. He had made, as was only natural, an indelible impression on her heart. The hope of seeing him again, kept her up under all her vexations, and the idea of pleasing him was at the bottom of all her exertions. He was the ideal hero to whom she acted, he was the type to which she referred all the qualities attributed to the heroes in the pieces they acted; and as her consciousness of power in her profession increased, her only idea was, that it would be something to display to him. It was with reference to him she valued it. This secret sentiment grew and increased in strength every day. She did not know where he was to be found, nor in what condition or life he was; but she never, for a second, wavered in her firm conviction that he would find her again; about the probable when and where, she did not perplex herself.

The company was not always stationed in the same town; they had a regular circuit; and though the coming or going of an equestrian troop seems even less than

unimportant to the town, it was an essential affair to them, and their business to make it so considered by as many in the town as possible. After various removals, they at length came to M——, about twelve months after Bianca had joined the company.

CHAPTER VIII.

To return to Alice and her mother, whom we left long since on their way to call on Mrs. Haslitt. On their arrival at that worthy lady's they were ushered into the drawing-room, which was rather small in its dimensions, but the furniture and appointments were of the most sumptuous description. The walls were covered with highly-coloured and richly-gilt paper; the window-curtains were of light blue and silver brocaded satin, but carefully preserved by chintz covers; the carpet was velvet pile of the most highly decorative pattern; marble slabs, richly gilt bronze sconces, and two large mirrors were dispersed about the room; a cut glass chandelier, rather too large for the size of the room, hung from the ceiling; a few splendidly bound books furnished the heavily carved rosewood table; an exquisitely designed French time-piece was on the chimney-piece; the steel grate was quite dazzling in its brilliancy, and a comfortable fire was blazing in it; nothing could look handsomer or more comfortable. No one was in the room when they entered, and they had full time to look round.

"Well," said Alice's mother, "Mrs. Haslitt keeps her house more elegantly than any one else I know ; it is quite a show to see it ! I am sure I wonder how she manages to make her housemaid keep all her things so nice. Ah, Alice, I wish, instead of tossing up your head at Mrs. Haslitt, you would take pattern by her, it would be better for you. How proud I should feel to see you mistress of such a house as this ! If any worthy young man would but come and offer you such a home, I hope you would not go and frighten him away with your nonsense, just because he did not happen to have so many fine fancies as yourself. It is all my prayer to see you happily settled before I die ; but sometimes I fear you will disappoint all my hopes. If young Mr. Haslitt now should happen to come in, do, pray, be civil to him, and don't look as if you did not know what you were saying. If you only knew how ignorant it makes you look, you would not do it. And, besides, what right have you to set yourself up, I should like to know ?"

Her harangue was here cut short by the entrance of Mrs. Haslitt herself, dressed in a rich green satin dress and Brussels lace collar, fastened with a gorgeous brooch, —had it not been for these, she might have been mistaken for the housemaid. She was a tall, homely-featured, cross-looking woman, and addressed her guests in a strong provincial accent.

Alice's mother began, by hoping they had not called at an unseasonable time.

"Oh dear, no, ma'am," said Mrs. Haslitt ; "but I

have been so flurried this morning, that I fear I have made you wait. Would you believe it, ma'am, my housemaid, whom I thought such a treasure—I have found out in an intrigue with one of the men at the Works! She has been in the habit of letting him into the kitchen when we are all in bed of a night!"

"There is no being up to the depravity of servants and such people," said Alice's mother, in a sympathising tone. "How did you find her out?"

"Quite by the merest accident, ma'am; I happened to have the toothache last night, after I was in bed, and I got up again, as I did not like to disturb the servants, and came down stairs myself for a clove of ginger. I fancied I heard voices, and walked very softly right into the kitchen, and there found my lady, sitting as comfortable as you please, on one side of the fire, and Andrews on the other, and a jug of hot ale on the table between them! I declare you might have knocked me down with a feather! However, I soon ordered him out, and walked my hussey up to her own room, and locked her in. And what do you think she had the impudence to tell me this morning, when I pointed out to her the shamefulness of her conduct? She said servants were as much flesh and blood as their mistresses; and that, if I had allowed her to receive him at proper times, she would not have let him in on the sly. She pretends he is going to marry her, but I don't believe a word of it. However, I turned her out this morning, and she may go courting where she pleases, I'll have none of it in my house. As I told her, I hire my servants to do my

work, and not to entertain followers. This makes the third housemaid I have had in four months. I am sure I slave myself to death in looking after them, and yet cannot get my work done, which is rather hard, considering there are three women servants, and only Mr. H., my son, and myself. But they are all a set of lazy, ungrateful, deceitful sluts. I declare if I leave my tea-caddy unlocked for an hour, I find it half emptied; and as for bread, butter, and beer, there is no end to their wastefulness; look after them as one will, there's no having one's eyes in every place at once. I declare it's scold, scold, scold, from morning till night, till I am quite worn out, and no good comes of it."

The two discreet matrons now launched forth in a declamatory duet on the iniquities of the race of servants in general, and their own specimens of them in particular, till any stranger hearing them talk would have felt as one might be supposed to do if our natural eyes were suddenly gifted to discern the numerous animals and unknown monsters infesting a drop of water, as seen in the oxy-hydrogen microscope. In the midst of their discourse the son of Mrs. Haslitt came in—the same young man to whom Alice had been desired to be civil. He was tall, light-complexioned, heavy-looking, rather handsome. He was very hungry, and wanted his dinner directly, that he might get back to the mill without delay; so he did not look remarkably pleased at the sight of visitors in the drawing-room—nevertheless, he bowed and took a chair beside Alice; which her mother perceiving, redoubled her eloquence

to Mrs. Haslitt, in order that the young people might make up as much agreeable conversation as they chose, which did not however promise to be much, for Alice continued to read one of the ornamental books she had taken from the table. At length, catching the echo of a more than usually bitter tirade, he ventured to say:

“Well now, there’s my mother on her everlasting subject! I declare she makes more noise and bother about managing her three women, than I and my father do over four hundred men. I declare I feel sorry sometimes for our servants, they seem scarcely considered like human beings; I cannot make out how it is they can be so bad as she says, unless they are worried into it. I tell her sometimes she is like the old woman in the fable, who used to make her maids get up at cock-crowing to spin, and all they thought of was circumventing her every way they could think of;—but women do not seem to have any feeling for each other.”

Alice looked at him with some complacency, and asked him how he managed his men; and he was about entering into all the particulars of what he did for their comfort, for it was one of his hobbies, when Alice’s mother rose to take leave, pressing both mother and son to fix a day for coming to see her.

Arrived at home, poor Alice hoped she might have a little time to herself, and after dinner sat down to “Sismondi’s *Literature du Midi*,” but had scarcely found her place when her mother entered the room.

“Oh, Alice, what are you there at your reading again? Well, you may keep your book for just half

an hour, and then do set to work to something useful. You might make Fido a collar; I have mentioned it two or three times. There now, make good use of your time, it is just half-past four now, and you may read away till five o'clock."

Alice was only called away twice from her book, once to look for a lost key, and once to fetch some old linen from the bottom of a chest at the top of the house. It cannot be denied that all this was very worrying. At first Alice had endeavoured, by sitting up at night after she had retired to her room, to find time for her favourite employments; but her mother was a house-keeper of the old school, and would not for the world have gone to bed without first perambulating the house, and seeing with her own eyes that every fire and candle was safely extinguished: so Alice had no chance of spoiling her eyes by midnight study. The only available time she could call her own, was before her mother came down to breakfast in the morning; and as if it had been decreed that all the mother's good qualities should be special points of annoyance to the daughter, Mrs. Helmsby was a perversely early riser. And yet she was not wilfully unkind; had no intention of tormenting her daughter in all this; she was to the full as much perplexed and troubled by Alice and her taste for reading and unprofitable employments, as Alice was by her mother's matter-of-fact, worrying industry, about things which a servant might have done equally well. Mrs. Helmsby thought it her duty to discourage her daughter's fine fancies, as she called them; and Alice,

to do her justice, had very little skill or tact to recommend them to her mercy.

Alice was a type of a very numerous class of English women, whose fine qualities, for lack of wise guidance, evaporate amid the common material details of household life, leaving them ineffectual and incomplete—grown children without the grace of childhood. She had a soft flexible nature, which shrank from blame rather than aspired to win praise; she had a kind of morbid conscientiousness, which made her fancy herself in the wrong whenever she met with a want of sympathy; and she was really miserable at feeling herself so different to those around her. She shrank from all outward manifestation of taste or feeling, except when sanctioned by some one to whom she looked up. Gentle, timid, unenterprising, yet with indomitable tastes, and a refinement of nature almost amounting to fastidiousness, she resembled a choice and graceful plant, which, for want of support, trails along the ground, putting forth its delicate tendrils in all directions to find something higher and stronger than itself round which to cling. She every day became more restless, dreamy, and melancholy, deepening at times into positive depression; the good that was in her lay rather in capacity, than in any definite well-developed qualities. Under wise guidance, she might have been trained into a valuable character, but wise guidance is precisely the blessing that seldomest falls to a woman's lot. Certainly her clever, worldly, bustling mother was not the one likely to afford it.

There was one object amid all that surrounded her which alone seemed in sympathy with the vague yearnings and dim aspirations of her nature, and that was an old picture, which had been saved at the general dispersion of her father's collection. It had been recently deposed from its place in the dining-room, to make room for a portrait of Mrs. Helmsby, taken in the most stylish turban and best fitting gown that Miss Higgins, chief milliner and dress-maker to the town of —, could invent for the occasion. Alice begged to have the unhoused picture placed in her own room; she had loved it from a child; it seemed to have a mysterious sympathy with the vague emotions which lay dumb and oppressive at her heart; it was an opening through which she escaped from the contact of the dull, harsh, common details by which she was hemmed in on all sides. It represented a Spanish convent amongst mountains, surrounded by dark tall trees, growing out of the crags that lay piled on all sides covered with long green moss; a clear dark twilight was spread over the whole, which gave a strange and weird-like stillness to the scene. Alice knew nothing about pictures, but her whole soul was athirst after the ideal, and there was that in the picture which it soothed her to look upon. She had the sensibility of genius without its creative power; she had not force enough to break through the rough husk of her actual life and assert her inner soul; she had not the gift of utterance in any way, and the life was almost choked out of her by the rank, over-fed, material prosperity which surrounded her.

Society in a prosperous commercial town, is a raw material not worked up into any social or conventional elegances. Some of the very highest qualities are latent there, but lying quietly like gold in its native vein, not recognisable even when disinterred by those who are conversant only with it as it appears worked up by jewellers. Labour has never yet been made to look lovely, and those engaged in labour have nothing picturesque or engaging in their manners. Alice had nothing of a philosopher about her, and therefore saw nothing but that which was obvious, and which jarred on her somewhat morbid fastidiousness. The men engaged all day in business operations on a large scale, frequently with several hundred workpeople to manage, were not likely to feel any interest in small refinements and elegancies for which there was no tangible use. Consequently female society went for very little. To manage the house well, and to see that the dinner was punctual and well appointed; to be very quiet, and not talk nonsense, or rather to talk very little of any thing; were the principal qualities desired in wives and daughters. Any attempt to show off, or attract attention by a display of graceful prettinesses, would have called forth comments rather broad than deep. They were tired and harassed when they came home from business, and were in no mood for any thing more exalted than to make themselves comfortable; their energies were all engrossed in *one* direction, namely, towards their business, which was the object "first, last, midst, and without end" of their life; and they were not up to taking any trouble for the

sake of society. The women being thus thrown chiefly amongst each other for companionship, had not a high tone of thought; for women never elevate each other, but fall into a fraternity of petty interests and trivial rivalries. They each extolled their own husband, and adopted all his opinions, only with less good sense and more exaggeration. The young ladies were pretty, trifling, useless beings, waiting their turn to be married, and in the meanwhile, doing their worsted work, and their practising, and their visitings; and were on the whole nicely dressed, quiet, well-conducted young women, with as little enthusiasm as could well be desired.

CHAPTER IX.

ALICE was now about twenty. She was not at all popular amongst her own set; the young ladies declared she was "insipid," and the young men pronounced her "conceited;" so that her mother had the mortification to see all the "good matches" in the neighbourhood "snapped up" by girls very inferior, as she in her heart owned, to her Alice—who, if we are to confess the truth, had never received a single offer. The good lady, though the quintessence of decorum, had entertained great hopes that, by a little prudent encouragement and management, young Mr. Haslitt might be induced to propose. He had indeed been heard to declare that Miss Alice could make herself very agreeable if she chose, and was not in the least proud when you came to talk to her; he had stood up for her on all occasions, and had paid her a good deal of what is called attention, and Alice disliked him less than any body else; but, in spite of all these promising symptoms, a young Scotch girl, who had come on a visit to his mother, carried off the prize before Alice's mother was more than aware of

her arrival. Young Mr. Haslitt had proposed and been accepted; and on her calling to invite Mrs. Haslitt and her visitor to a pic-nic, she learned the tidings, which dashed her castle in the air to the ground, and almost deprived her of presence of mind enough to offer her congratulations. She returned home in no very good humour, and throwing herself into a large chair, began to fan herself with some violence.

"How tired you seem, mamma!" said Alice, approaching to remove her bonnet.

"And no wonder," said her mother; "here you let me go toiling and slaving myself for your good, and you neither move hand nor foot yourself. Well, well!"

"Will Mrs. Haslitt come, mamma? I have been making the jelly, and it is quite brilliant. You must taste the milk-punch. I think it is capital, and a glass will do you good after your walk. I have finished all you left me to do, and I think you will say I have succeeded pretty well."

Alice left the room, and soon returned with a *pâté* and a glass of the milk-punch, which she had prepared for the pic-nic.

"Well," said her mother, somewhat refreshed, "I must say you have worked well; but only to think that young Haslitt is engaged to be married to that young Scotch lassie! I fancy it was all made up before she came here. He met her last year when he went to the Moors shooting; and I must candidly say he is throwing himself away. A more dawdling, ordinary-looking

young person I never saw; I wonder what it is he sees in her, for my part."

"Dear mamma, now just put your feet up on the sofa till dinner-time, and tell me all you have heard. You may as well rest while you are talking, you know."

"Well, I don't mind if I do; there, I am quite comfortable; now sit down yourself and I will tell you. I had always in my own mind laid out that young Haslitt for you, Alice. Well, that is all passed, but I am sure he admired you. I had scarcely sat down, and was just giving my invitation, when the young lady came in. 'Give me leave,' said Mrs. Haslitt, 'to introduce to you Miss Mackintosh, my daughter-in-law that will be.' You may think how surprised I was! I declare I could hardly speak for a minute, and then of course I said all that was proper, but indeed she looks a very unfit person for him, and then I invited them both, and they will come, and young Haslitt of course won't fail; but I declare I don't care whether he does or not. When people are courting, they are no company for others; we must look up some young men, or it will go off very stupidly."

"What is the Scotch lady, like?" asked Alice.

"Oh, nothing at all out of the way—she does not seem to have a word to say for herself."

"Well, I hope they will be happy," said Alice; "but upon my word I always feel as if it were such a risk to run. How terrible it must be, if, after you are mar-

ried, you should see any one you like better than your husband!"

"My dear Alice," said her mother, turning round so suddenly that her bonnet fell off the sofa and pitched on the bird of Paradise plume, "my dear Alice, never let me hear such a shocking speech again. What would any gentleman think who had heard you? When you are married it will be your duty to love your husband more than any one else in the world; and no young woman with a well-regulated mind ever thinks of doing otherwise. Such an idea is quite shocking. A well-conducted modest woman would no more think of any man except her husband, than she would think of getting tired of her own father or mother, and wishing for somebody else; she must be very depraved, indeed, if such an idea comes into her head."

"Well, but," said Alice, gently, "a husband is not like a father or mother given to one by Providence; you take him on your own judgment. If I, for instance, had married that young Haslitt, as you seem to have wished, I am sure I should have got very tired of him, for I could not have loved him, and should only have taken him because he was a good match; and if he should have lost all his money in business, what would have become of me?"

"I don't like to hear your head running on love so much," replied her mother; "it is a thing none but silly girls talk about; and, whatever you do, never let a gentleman hear you; men don't like it; it looks forward and impudent; and besides, my dear, I can tell you, though

you may not, perhaps, believe me, that however hot love may be at first, all that goes off fast enough, and it makes no difference at the end of six months whether you married for love or not, provided always you have chosen prudently, and have a respectable, steady, sensible man for your husband; whatever men may be before marriage, they all fall out of love pretty soon afterwards; it is to your children you must look, and not to your husband; for if you expect him to be in love with you, and make much of you, the sooner you get rid of that idea the better; it is a silly romantic notion only found in novels."

"Then must I neither love my husband, nor any one else?" replied Alice, disconsolately.

"Of course you must; don't I tell you it is your duty to love him, but in a sober, rational way; life was given for something more important than loving, and such nonsense. I wish I could see you more sober-minded."

"I often wonder what life *was* given us for," said Alice.

"La! how you talk," replied her mother; "any one to hear you would think you a fool. That is the way you lose yourself. This life was given you to do your duty in, of course, there is no difficulty in seeing that; to fill up your time with useful employments. You have very wrong and wild notions of life; it is very different to what you expect; you have an idea of liking this and not liking that, but what have you to look forward to, I should like to know, but marrying some honest, respectable man, who will support you decently in the sphere

in which you were born. You say you could not like young Haslitt—what is it you expect? a nobleman to come in a coach and six to make you an offer? I wish I could see you cured of these flighty notions and more sober-minded.”

“But why must I marry at all?” said Alice.

“For what else do women come into the world,” replied her mother, “but to be good wives? Poor profitless, forlorn creatures they are, when they live single and get to be old; unless indeed they are rich enough to keep up an establishment, with a parcel of dogs and cats and parrots. Depend upon it, Alice, if a young woman is lucky enough to be married to a steady, respectable young man, it is the best thing that can happen to her; and then she is something in the world.”

Here dinner cut short the worthy matron’s harangue. Afterwards, when they returned to the drawing-room, her mother (who had talked herself into a good temper, for we all feel good-humoured when we have succeeded in giving utterance to what strikes us as being very sensible) said,

“You have not prepared your dress for Mrs. Dickson’s dinner-party on Thursday; when I was in town this morning I got the satin; go and fetch it whilst there is daylight, and whilst you are busy we can have a little rational conversation.”

Alice fetched the dress, and began to take out the sleeves, the shape of which required altering.

“I did not buy you a new dress,” said her mother,

“for I expect there will be a *soirée* when the Association comes, and Miss Higgins, the milliner, told me there was likely to be a great change in the material of evening dresses, so I thought it would be better to wait. But as I was passing the shop door, Mr. Bruce stopped me to say he had received an assortment of the sweetest French goods; and though it was monstrously dear, I could not resist this scarf; I thought you would admire it so much. Is it not beautiful?” continued she, unfolding it. “I declare that business of young Haslitt quite put it out of my head before dinner.”

The scarf, which was really beautiful, was duly admired and thankfully received by Alice, for no woman is insensible to the acquisition of a piece of finery, although comparatively few have the taste and patience to pay the minute attention necessary to dress well: but any body is competent to put on a scarf or a turban; the minute finishing touches in dress as in art show the master, and masters in no pursuit are plentiful.

“I wonder who will be here for the *soirée*,” said Alice; “it is such a pleasure to see distinguished men, even though one may not be able to understand all they talk about.”

“I don’t know, but they say there is a *chance* that the Queen will come, and I don’t see why she should not come here as much to see learned men, as go to the races;—it would be a comfort to see the *real* bonnet and shawl she wears!”

“It is raining,” said Alice, shortly after, “and it is

lecture night besides; do you think you are prudent to go, mamma?"

"It is a very unpleasant evening," replied her mother, "but I don't like to miss, on account of the example. If we are not punctual at church, how can we expect the poor people to be? But I really think the poor people about here require more good example setting them than in any other parish; and yet they are no better that I can see. I sometimes wish there were no poor people, and then one would not have so much responsibility for being better off; it would be happier for *them*, poor things, for they have little enjoyment as it is, God help them, in spite of all we can do!"

"But staying away this one wet night will do no harm," said Alice, gently; "and as I shall go, the pew will not be empty."

"No, no, my dear, it is a bad thing to break through a habit; we are all so apt to be self-indulgent; staying at home to-night would only make it harder to go another time; one excuse always admits another. We will have our tea when we come back—it will be something comfortable to look forward to. Wrap yourself well up, and mind you put on your strongest shoes."

Mrs. Helmsby caught a bad cold at the lecture; and the pic-nic, from this cause, and a variety of other circumstances added, did not come off; which she the less regretted, as she told Alice, because it put her out of all patience to see that young Haslitt look so soft and foolish with that Miss Mackintosh.

That failure in her matrimonial speculations was a heavy blow and a great discouragement to the worthy lady—especially as she was obliged candidly to own that the balance of perfection was decidedly in favour of Alice.

CHAPTER X.

THE day of Mrs. Dickson's dinner-party arrived, and Mrs. Helmsby was sufficiently recovered from her cold to attend it; and at the appointed hour, she and her black velvet dress, and her diamond ear-rings, appeared in Mrs. Dickson's drawing-room; Alice dressed in pale pink satin, and without any ornaments at all, was with her, looking as pretty and lady-like as possible.

Mrs. Dickson was in the habit of giving a great many dinner parties; one differing from another as Lamb or Venison happened to be the presiding dish, or as it was the turn of Mr. and Mrs. Haslitt or Mr. and Mrs. and Miss Mason, to be invited; but all had a strong family likeness in being all equally sumptuous, the plate equally massive, and the guests equally heavy to match. Alice had grown to fancy it a matter of course that all dinner parties should be dull; it seemed to her as essentially an unalterable etiquette, as that there should be soup and fish.

About ten of the guests had assembled when Alice and her mother arrived—all people who were in the

habit of meeting; but, in a few moments a stranger entered, a tall solidly built middle aged man, with an extremely quiet air; he addressed the mistress of the house in a remarkably gentle voice, and with a manner quite different to that of any one Alice had ever seen before. He had been announced as Mr. Bryant; several gentlemen gathered round him, and began to talk of the markets, the state of the country, and whether the harvest was likely to be well got in, as if no such beings as women were in the room. Whilst Alice was sitting watching the new comer, the mistress of the house came to her and said, "Well, Miss Alice, I have got a new beau to-day, you see! He is rather old for you, to be sure: but he is a very nice man, for all that; and I want you to talk to him because he is very clever, and has travelled a great deal, and you know so much history and geography that I quite depend on you for keeping him amused during dinner."

"Where has he been travelling?" asked Alice.

"It is where has he *not* been! My Mr. Dickson tells me that he has been establishing iron works somewhere, where hardly any body has ever travelled even; but you must ask him at dinner."

Here the entrance of the remaining guests in rapid succession put an end to her conversation, and dinner being shortly afterwards announced, little Mr. Dickson offered his arm to Mrs. Helmsby, and Alice was escorted down by a bluff, square-headed, elderly gentleman, given to telling venerable jokes and stories, that

with a different disguise of names and places had, no doubt, figured from the days of Odin; but he chuckled over them with as much glee as if they were fresh from the mint of human whimsicality.

"This way, Mr. Glenton," cried Mrs. Dickson, "let Miss Alice divide you and Mr. Bryant; I cannot do without my young favourite in my neighbourhood—I call her my princess. Mr. Bryant, let me introduce you to her. We are only plain people here. You must not compare us with the fine ladies abroad."

Here the bustle of getting seated at table having subsided, the business of dinner commenced, and put a stop to good Mrs. Dickson's flow of talk.

Mr. Bryant did not appear at all disposed to test Alice's stores of history or geography, for all his attention seemed given to assisting Mrs. Dickson to dispense her dishes; besides, her other neighbour seemed inclined to talk for the whole table. When the ladies returned to the drawing-room, Alice was placed at the piano by Mrs. Dickson, and entreated to play something; whilst the elder ladies either dosed, or settled family receipts, or talked of their servants;—what young ladies there were gathered together and discussed Mrs. Ellis's novel, and thought the heroine a very natural character, but that it was doing a great deal, certainly, to give up her fortune;—and then another asked if any one intended to go to the Chemical Lectures to be delivered next week, —and many things of the same sort: till coffee came, and then some of the gentlemen made their appearance, and Mr. Bryant amongst them; he came and sat down

by Alice at the piano, and asked her whether she gave up much time to music;—then he began to tell her about some Bohemian students, with whose singing he had been much struck when in Germany. He was very quiet, but Alice felt him at once to be very different from all the people who surrounded her, and was much more interested than she had ever been before; but still he was so quiet, she felt rather afraid of him. Silent, quiet people, have a charm and mystery about them which gives them a great advantage over more demonstrative mortals;—nobody knows exactly what they think, nor the impression made on them by any thing; all within them has the prestige of an oracle; the extent of what they indicate is unknown, and what little is uttered goes so far! Every body has felt the charm of a kind, or even of a reasonably civil expression; from one of these reserved, silent persons; “it is not much,” is the common expression, but from so-and-so it means “a great deal;” —it is like signing a blank check on our self-complacency.

Alice soon felt this charm, and by little and little began to feel a most unusual degree of interest in both what she heard and in what she herself was saying, for she was asking questions to which she felt very desirous to have an answer. He told her about his recent journey into Hungary, to a part which has never yet figured in any hand-book for travellers, and about a most singular race of people flourishing there, who belong to no known nation, and might pass either for the one of the lost tribes of Israel, or as the original gypsy

stock, from which all the others have wandered forth on the face of the earth. A race of idealised gypsies, however, if such they be; living an allowed and recognised life, under no fear of the magistrates, and quite free from the sins of poaching and robbing hen-roosts. He had arrived at one of these villages during fair time, and he gave Alice a graphic account of a picturesque procession in which the handsomest girl in the tribe was carried through the village crowned with flowers on the last day of the fair, and of the strange dances and *polkas* which closed the festival. Alice's imagination was completely captivated by the vision of that wild and lonely country in its utter isolation from the rest of the world—surrounded by those mysterious giant mountains, and that strange unknown tribe of people, with no filiation amongst the other families of the earth. She could have sat and listened for ever, but a general move amongst the guests had commenced, and her mother amongst the rest had risen to depart. Alice returned home in a dreamy reverie. The stranger, with his cold passionless manner, and kind, quiet voice, and the new things she had heard that night, were mingled in her dreams, till she awoke with the fright of finding herself carried through the air over impassable mountains, and placed where no human being could approach her! She went down stairs the next morning, a new creature; the dull monotony of her life had received a quickening impulse; she had found an object on which all the pent-up passionate affection of her unoccupied

dreaming heart might be poured forth;—it required but a touch for the lava torrent of her soul to burst out, and bear down all the small frozen barriers with which she had been surrounded. William Bryant became the hero of her desert! Her cheek was flushed, and her eye sparkled the next morning when she descended to breakfast. People must have been *emuyé* within an inch of final suffocation, before they can know the blessing of something to interest their faculties. Her mother hardly knew what to make of it; but as she went about her usual avocations with an energy not usual, she could not find fault; and, in fact, her maternal vanity was gratified to perceive the attention her daughter had received from a person of much more importance than all the young Mr. Haslitts or Mr. Smiths, or Mr. Oldfields in the town, put together. It was in high good-humour she sat down to her daily stitching after breakfast.

“Well!” she said, “Alice, I must say we had a charming dinner-party yesterday. I never saw any thing go off better. Did you remark that pretty new side dish in the second course? I must ask Mrs. Dickson for the receipt, and it is as nice as it looks; those sweet-breads were dressed in quite a new fashion—recollect, my dear, we have some our next dinner-party;—and, by the way, we owe one now to a good many people. I should like to have it whilst that Mr. Bryant is in town. Mrs. Dickson said he was staying over the Association, and that he will read a paper about something;

he seems a very nice man, quite the gentleman. Do you know, Alice, he reminded me a little of your poor dear father."

"Ah!" said Alice, "then that accounts for his being so very agreeable."

"What were you and he talking about so fast?" asked her mother.

"He was telling me all about his travels, mamma," replied Alice, blushing; "he has been abroad a great deal."

"Yes, so I heard," said her mother; "I managed to pick up a good deal about him from Mrs. Dickson. She says he is very rich, and has just established large iron-works in some outlandish place; so far off they can hardly get to it. He is very well connected, and lives somewhere in Lancashire."

Alice listened with great interest to all this gossip, and even volunteered to call on Mrs. Dickson for the receipt, in order that the cook might have time to practise it before the party. Mrs. Helmsby nodded sagaciously to herself; it was the first time she and her daughter had ever felt any real sympathy together. Notes were written and sent out. Mr. Bryant graciously accepted—which was all Alice cared for. Nevertheless, she did not see him again until the *soirée* of the Association, for she had gone out to inquire after somebody's cold or rheumatism the day Mr. Bryant called on Mrs. Helmsby! The disappointment may be imagined; but still the *soirée* was in sight, which was to pay for all,

and with the prospect of the dinner-party, Alice could not be very miserable.

At length the *soirée* arrived. Alice felt very much dissatisfied with her own appearance; but her mother declared she looked very nice, and for once, we are inclined to be of her mother's opinion. She was dressed in white tarlatan, over white satin; a small wreath of myrtle in her hair was all the ornament she wore; and with her face a little flushed, she had all the animation of look she generally wanted.

The large room in the town-hall was brilliantly lighted, and thronged with elegantly-dressed women and all the respectability and gentility of the town and neighbourhood. Many strangers were there from all parts; and every eye was turned on the *savans*, who had attended the Association, and who were walking quietly about, very little impressed with the effort that was made to do them honour, looking, indeed, rather bored than otherwise, as they blandly attempted to give intelligible replies to questions (put by those lucky enough to get an introduction) which required the knowledge of a life-time to be compressed into a portable answer, that might be carried away like a receipt for venison sauce.

Alice remained amongst the crowd of nicely-dressed young ladies, with bouquets in their hands, and wreaths in their hair, each with a separate personal freight of hope, vanity, and importance, but all massed together in an undistinguished throng, like the points in a

mosaic brooch. She had one hope, that Mr. Bryant would come and speak to them; and that was all the stake she had in the evening. But time wore on; and Alice, who had hitherto pertinaciously kept beside her mother, afraid to move, for fear of losing the one important moment, was at last obliged to leave her place. An elderly gentleman, a great friend of her mother's, approached and offered her his arm, to walk through the rooms, promising to point out all the grand people. Her mother, pulling her lace shawl over her shoulders, rose at once, and Alice, with a sigh, had to follow her example. Every young lady there had far rather have had a dance, and thought it a great pity such a charming band should be wasted; walking about, and looking at curiosities, or even at learned men, was in their opinion a very dry substitute for their usual allowance of dancing and flirtation. And many of the young men were of the same opinion; they could only hope that the mayor would let them have one little dance at the end of the evening. Alice and her mother, and their escort, threaded their way through the crowded rooms; and, at last, in a doorway, talking to a knot of professors of various sciences, her eye discovered Mr. Bryant; but though he recognised them with a pleased bow, he did not attempt to break off his conversation, and the movement of the crowd carried them away in a different direction. But in about half-an-hour, whilst they were in the refreshment-room, Mr. Bryant again approached; at

first he did not see them, and began to eat an ice at another stand. Alice pointed him out to her mother, who boldly accosted him. Mr. Bryant seemed quite pleased to have been recognised—said he had not perceived them, and putting down his plate, offered his arm to Alice.

“How do you manage to get on with all these people?” said he, after a few moments’ silence.

Alice started—it was the first time she had ever heard them called any thing but highly sensible, respectable persons, a great deal better than herself. She was too much abashed to reply immediately.

“I suppose,” continued he, “you would parody the words of Bacon, and say, ‘Some are born stupid, some achieve stupidity, and some have stupidity thrust upon them!’—which latter is your own case. It is when you see a great gathering like this that you perceive the uncultivated state of social habits amongst the English; there are, no doubt, exceptions, but social talent is not indigenous amongst them; they are all incumbered with themselves, and consequently, don’t move well; there is all the dead material for enjoyment, but no life to set it going. However, I must say, I can stand any thing but your superior and respectable people. I have been a long time out of England, you know, and that must be my excuse. I can stand dulness *au naturel*; I consider it as I would any other human affliction—blindness, or lameness, or what not; but, when it will arrogate to itself a superiority, and claim a sort of apostolical succession from the wisdom of Solo-

mon, and set up little fancy anathemas on every thing, and every body, who are not, like themselves, 'measured from the standard of Cornhill,' I confess I get out of all patience and all charity ! I know you to be a good listener, Miss Helmsby; and some pitying Providence, or rather some instinct, has led me to you, for I am just now quite savage at all the nonsense I have heard to-night. So much innate vulgarity and stupidity I never heard before. As men of business and enterprise, Englishmen are wonderful. Do not suppose, for a moment, I underrate the sterling granite qualities, the real *stuff* that lies in them—but that does not come out in a *soirée*; they make no show; they lie like gold, quietly in the mine, ready to be dug out; but your provincial *superior people*, who have attained a small reputation—oh, those are terrible! I have just been listening to one of them, who was speaking to C—the geologist, and propounding his 'Asses' Bridge' as if it were a new revelation. I left him in despair; but, if C—do not pick his way through the Mosaic theory of creation, and keep his chin cleverly above the waters of Noah's deluge, he will be held up us a heathen man, and be attacked for his insidious principles."

"Do you think the man he was talking to able then to hold him up?" said Alice, extremely comforted by this tirade, which gave utterance to her own feelings.

"Well, true, you're right, that is his chance; it is a sort of compensation for many blunders, that when a man has gained a name for any thing he may hide under the shadow of it, it gives him a *prestige*, and enables

him to put down impertinent questions with words. C—— is a great friend of mine—have you ever seen him? Do you know many of the distinguished visitors by sight?"

"No," said Alice, "I would give a great deal to have them pointed out to me. I like to speculate on their faces."

"Well, then, if Mrs. Helmsby will trust you with me, we will make a *voyage autour de la chambre*."

Mrs. Helmsby had reached a vacant place on a bench, and readily consented to remain where she was until they returned.

Mr. Bryant pointed out to Alice every one of any note, and gave her a succinct account of what they were distinguished for. Alice found herself talking quite at her ease, and speaking the things that had so long been hid in her heart; and it was a new, inexpressible pleasure to be listened to, and replied to, as if there were nothing either strange or reprehensible in her ideas. Her companion made clear her meaning to herself, and brought so much kind good sense to bear on her vague, unformed, floating notions, that it is no wonder if Alice, charmed with his gentle voice and manner, felt all her vague aspirations more than realised, and destined from this evening to wear the shape and aspect of Mr. Bryant! True, he was a good deal older than herself, but she fancied that half the charm.

"I fear," said Mrs. Helmsby, the next morning, as they sat over their work as usual, "that Mr. Bryant is not too sound in his religious views; I fear, from some-

thing I heard, that he is by no means a regular church-goer; indeed, Mrs. Dickson told me he had been heard to say that he required a *rest* on Sunday, and could not stand going to church twice a day! You did not happen to ask him whether he was a member of the Church of England, did you, Alice?"

"No," replied Alice, quietly, "I never thought about it. I should not suppose he would ever be likely to do any thing that was not right."

"I don't know that," replied her mother; "he has been abroad a long time, and there young men are either apt to be led astray, by popish delusions and soul-destroying heresies, as Mr. Wright calls them, or else to fall into the fatal snare of infidelity and human reason; but I shall not rest till I have asked him."

"My dear," resumed Mrs. Helmsby, after a pause, during which she had been carefully adjusting a petticoat body—"my dear, have you got that receipt from Mrs. Dickson? I should like to have it for our party—we must begin to arrange what we will have; there are only four days till the twenty-third." Then she wandered off into the regions of the land of Goshen, settling her roast and boiled, her fishes and fowls; having determined in her own mind to give the very most elegant dinner that had ever been seen in N——. To her surprise she had a most zealous adjutant in Alice, who seemed as anxious as herself that the dinner should be perfect. She could not make it out. "Ah! Alice," said she, half reproachfully, "there would be some

pleasure in giving dinners, if you would always support me in this way."

The dinner-time arrived, the guests came, and every thing went off as well as possible; but Alice little suspected that Mr. Bryant left their house fully convinced that Alice was exactly the woman he wanted for a wife! He was not in love with her, but he thought her a charming lady-like young creature, with plenty of sense, if she were taught to use it; in short, his judgment was quite convinced he might look a long time before he found any one else so suitable; that was the grand point with a man like him, and there was no doubt but that he would fall in love afterwards quite as much as was necessary.

In the meantime, Alice and her mother were to go to Matlock the following week, and he had to break his purpose to his only sister, and to arrange his affairs so as to be able to take a holiday.

But an offer of marriage is far too important a thing to introduce at the end of a chapter.

CHAPTER XI.

THOSE who have read that delicious old book, Amory's "Life of John Bunce," will know that the north of England once was full of unexplored wildernesses, impassable mountains, mysterious caverns, leading to the bowels of the earth ; and, difficult as it may be to believe, yielding adventures second to nothing in the "Arabian Nights." It is not very much more than a century since he lived, and all his wonderful journeys and romantic discoveries have been explored in their length and breadth, by turnpike commissioners, if not by railway surveyors, and the mysteries have been subdued by statistics, till one knows where every road leads, and we are allowed to entertain no doubt about the turnings of the longest lane ; every foot of ground is known, and there is no hope left of being able to *lose oneself* ;—and that, as every body must have felt, is a dreadful drawback on the pleasure and excitement of finding oneself in a wild romantic *looking* country. It is wild and unknown to *us* alone, and our ignorance is

going to be speedily enlightened by guide-books, teaching us all the walks, and drives, "and points of view." The convenience and the cultivation, the civilisation and all that, is, of course, a wonderful improvement, and shows the progress of the species in a way that ought to rejoice one's philanthropy; for, "as man is no longer an individual, but a species," as Fanny Wright tells us, we all have an infinitesimal investment in the rise of human perfection. Still all the *hope* is taken out of travelling now. We know, beforehand, all we are going to see; and we, for our parts, cannot help wishing it were possible to set out like the heroes of old to seek our fortune, and walk to the end of the world, without knowing the history and geography of what we were going to find.

Derbyshire, in spite of its wonders being written down in the chronicles of guide-books, has still a look of mystery, with its peak and its caverns, and its Druidical remains; it seems as if it really had been, at no distant time, the abode of gnomes and spirits, who are even yet scarcely dispossessed of their ancient holdings. Men and women seem intruders living in the ruined abodes of a different order of beings. Good Mrs. Helmsby had no speculations of this kind, as she and Alice journeyed *en route* to Matlock, one fine afternoon, about ten days after the dinner party.

"I hope, Alice, we shall find Saxton's a comfortable house, and that the beds will be well aired; that is the great drawback in travelling; one can never feel quite

safe.—Well, I must say, that really is very pretty, indeed. Look, Alice, at those white houses, upon those rocks, nearly hidden with the trees.”

But Alice was silent. She was drinking in the sight—feeling, for the first time in the presence of the power of nature, crushed down before the mute aspect of superhuman beauty and majesty, which made all human utterance irreverent; taking her, for the moment, out of herself, away from her own hopes, and fears, and personalities, to feel overwhelmed before the grand inorganic majesty around her. The first sight of any scene that strikes us as really grand, touches our ideal; stuns all the small personalities within us: and bows us before the grandeur of a power which stands revealed before us impassive, incommunicable, pressing on our senses, but utterly unmindful of us, separated from us by a gulf of everlasting silence—for there is neither sound nor language which we may interpret, or by which we may draw nigh to it. All we have ever hoped, or feared, or desired for ourselves, seems then so pitiful and worthless, that our impulse is to fling ourselves down before the vast dumb aspect of nature, leaving time and chance to happen as they may. Alice felt choked with emotions she could not have expressed; but she leaned out of the chaise window to conceal from her mother the tears that coursed each other down her cheeks.

They arrived, at length, at Saxton's hotel, at Matlock, as all the village lay bathed in the golden lightning of the descending sun. The dinner-hour was passed, but

an early tea, and a chicken, in their own room, was a not unpleasant substitute. When they joined the company at supper, Mrs. Helmsby recognised, in a comfortable, portly, well-dressed woman, an old school-fellow, with whom she had once sworn everlasting friendship, which, however, had not survived the wear and tear of the first twelve months after leaving school. Circumstances separated them, and absence had almost made them forget each other, until this unexpected meeting at a *table d'hôte* stimulated their dormant sensibilities. It was a very pleasant meeting on both sides; they had not met for more than twenty years, and in that time they had married, and were now both of them widows; both had got wonderfully well over their loss, and both were very comfortably jointured.

Alice had the most reason to rejoice in this encounter, for it not only put her mother in an excellent flow of spirits, but she had so much to tell, and to hear, and to talk about, that Alice was left to follow her own devices, and ramble and explore as much as she pleased; added to which, Mrs. Fernly (her mother's new-found friend) was an active, comfortable woman, with a great notion of enjoying herself, and seeing every thing that was to be seen; and, as she had learned the best rides and drives, she was proud to take her friends about; and a little pony chaise belonging to the house was put into daily requisition. She won Alice's heart altogether, by allowing her to read out her subscription to the circulating library, whilst she was talking over old times with her mother.

One day Alice had taken her book—it was a volume of “Corrinne,” which she was reading for the first time—and had clambered up to the spot called the “Romantic Rocks” in guide-book parlance; they resemble an immense mountain shivered into a fantastic skeleton, and covered with a tangle of shrubs, and creeping plants. Seated in a cleft of rock so narrow, that she could scarce see the sky above her for the ivy that hung across, she was quite unconscious how the time flew by. The first reading of “Corrinne” is an epoch a woman never forgets, and Alice never lifted her head till she had come to the last line in the last page of the volume, and then it struck her she had been away a long time; on looking at her watch she found, with dismay, it was long past the dinner hour. She is not the first whom that book has beguiled into a breach of punctuality; but that would have been no comfort, even had the thought occurred. She started up and began to hasten to the inn, with a fear lest the scolding in store for her might be coupled with a prohibition of any more books from the library. It is very provoking to be brought back to such disagreeable realities; but one is never so sure to meet with a jar, as when one has been absorbed in a very highly wrought novel. She was crossing the fields with a rapid step, and lifting her head to see how she should best clamber over a somewhat awkward stile, when her eyes encountered, certainly the last person she expected to see—Mr. Bryant! He sprang over the stile with great eagerness. “You little know,”

said he, smiling, "the excitement your absence has caused; your mother and her friend have ordered the pony carriage to scour the country in search of you. Dinner has been over these two hours."

Alice was too much embarrassed to give a very definite answer, but murmured something about her book, and not knowing it was so late. "Is mamma very angry?" asked she.

"Well, I hardly know," replied he, smiling, "she had become uneasy, and perhaps when she finds you safe and sound, and that you have been in no sort of danger, she may be indignant at your having excited so much needless sensibility. If you were to sprain your ankle, now, she would quite forgive you."

But poor Alice looked confused, and distressed, and so evidently thought she had been guilty of a grievous breach of decorum, that Mr. Bryant ceased to rally her, but walked silently beside her for some time. Her embarrassment seemed to communicate itself to him. He had come to Matlock with every intention of proposing to her, and this was as fair an opportunity as he was ever likely to have. He had certainly intended to prepare the way a little, but then the thought of saving her from the scolding she evidently dreaded, was the small incident that determined him to risk his declaration at once. He had not any great fear of a refusal, but still "making an offer" is always a nervous thing, it is throwing every thing on the "hazard of the die." He made one or two efforts to speak, but no sound passed his lips. They at length

reached a place where the pathway branched off, one path leading to the inn, and the other through a small grove of trees, to the river side. Three more steps, and she would have turned to the right, and three minutes more would have ended their walk at the inn-door. He made a desperate effort, and said, in a husky voice, "Alice—Miss Helmsby, I mean—will you play the truant a few minutes longer—there is something I *must* say to you, will you hear me now?" He took her hand, and gently drew it through his arm, which she was too much agitated to resist, and led her down the other footpath. Alice felt the arm she was leaning on tremble.

"I fear," said he, after another pause, "that I am premature; if I am, forgive me. I came to this place only to see you; I have no other business here, and unless you bid me stay, I shall depart again to-morrow morning. I am come to put my fate in your hands, Alice. Do you think you can ever like me well enough to *marry* me?" He took the little hand that hung upon his arm; it trembled, but was not withdrawn. "Will you not speak to me *one* word, Alice? Will you tell me that you will try to like me? you have not seen much of me yet; but from the first moment I saw you, you have been to me, what no woman ever was before. Tell me—may I remain in Matlock, or must I go away to-morrow? I do not ask you to say you will have me now; I will have as much patience as you can wish; but will you think of what I have said?"

Alice's tears were falling abundantly, and she could not have spoken, had her life depended upon it ; but Mr. Bryant seemed to be able to interpret her emotion ; he pressed the hand he held to his lips, and said, in a whisper, "God bless you, Alice, you have made me very happy."

He did not now attempt to prolong their walk. On reaching the inn, Alice disengaged her arm, and passed rapidly to her own room, altogether stunned and bewildered. She was sensible of no feeling but the desire to be alone. Luckily her mother had not returned, and she was not interrupted till tea-time.

CHAPTER XII.

"ALICE!" said Mrs. Helmsby, entering her daughter's room, "I very much dislike your passion for locking yourself up in your bed-room during the daytime; it looks affected, to say the least of it; and now, pray, may I hear why you were absent from the dinner-table, where had you gone, and what were you doing?"

"I am very sorry, mamma," replied Alice, "I had taken out a book when I went to walk, as the day was so fine, and I sat down to read amongst the rocks, without observing how the time passed."

"Very romantic, indeed!" said her mother; "but if there be one thing I dislike to see in a young woman more than another, it is love of singularity; indeed, it is the only impropriety a well-brought-up young woman has it in her power to commit, but it paves the way for every thing that is wrong. If a young woman allows herself to be different to other people, she throws herself out of the path marked by propriety, and has no guide but her own giddy head; so no wonder if she, sooner or later, goes wrong; it does not even surprise people. 'We ex-

pected no better,' is the cry. It is no mark of superiority, Alice, whatever you may think; it only exposes your ignorance in the eyes of sensible people, and let me tell you, that, of all things, gentlemen dislike all approaches to eccentricity or singularity in a young woman's conduct; they may be very polite to your face, for they find their amusement in it, but no gentleman would *marry* a girl who set up to be remarkable."

Alice made a very pretty but rather scornful mouth at this climax.

"Ay, you may look as saucy as you please, Alice, but what I tell you is quite true; with all your airs you have not received a single offer of marriage, and that is the criterion of whether the men admire you. It is true you are very young, and have plenty of time before you, but the day may come when you will wish you had listened to me. Suppose any gentleman had seen you sitting reading by yourself amongst those rocks, he would have thought you just wished to be remarked."

All the delicious reveries in which Alice had been steeping her heart, were rudely destroyed by the coarse prosaic reality of her mother's discourse, like the rosy and golden clouds of sunset which thicken into leaden vaporous masses of darkness, without the majesty of night.

"I have something to tell you, mamma," said she at length, feeling the desperate necessity there was that her mother should be made acquainted with the occurrence of the morning, although it seemed almost sacrilege to mention it after such an exordium.

"Well, what is it?" said her mother, after wait-

ing in silence about a quarter of a minute,—“ Make haste, or the tea bell will ring, and you are not dressed yet! Will it not keep until bed time?”

If the reader can recall the time when he, a small child at school, was called upon for a barely-learned lesson—how he went slowly up to the master with eyes lingering to the last moment on the task which hovered on the brink of his comprehension—when the sudden jerk with which his book was taken, scared away all that was so nearly entering in, leaving him blank and stammering!—he can then sympathise with Alice when so compendiously desired “ to make haste.”

“ Mr. Bryant joined me as I was coming home,” said she, in a faltering voice.

“ Mr. Bryant!” interrupted her mother, “ what *can* have brought him here! Did he tell you?”

“ Yes,” said Alice, with some difficulty forcing herself to speak; “ he told me—he asked me—in short, he made me an offer.”

“ My dear Alice!” cried her astonished mother, as soon as she could take breath after such an announcement, “ my dear Alice, why did you not tell me this at once, instead of letting me find fault with you for half an hour, when you had such a piece of news as this! Let me hear all about it,—what did you say to him, and how did it all come about? I declare I had no suspicion of such a thing, though in general I have a tolerable insight into such matters. But first I will order tea to be brought up to us here, and you shall lie down whilst you tell me.”

Mrs. Helmsby rang the bell, drew the sofa and a large arm-chair to a comfortable proximity, and settled herself down for a regular gossip.

"Now, my dearest Alice," said she, at last, when the tea-tray had been brought and the waiter had retired, "tell me all about it, and do not miss any thing. I declare it makes me feel quite young again. Ah, Alice! when you have a grown up daughter you will know how proud it is to feel she is admired as she should be! None but a mother ever really cares for her girl's success;—but now begin—tell me first is your tea sweet enough?"

"Quite so, thank you, mamma," replied Alice—rather worried, if the truth must be told. Her mother's gossiping tone jarred on her feelings; however, thus adjured, she spoke, and gave a circumstantial narration of the events of the morning; but her own heart, her own thoughts, she could not lay bare; they were tender blossoms which contracted and almost withered beneath her mother's coarse version of maternal affection.

"Well, my dear Alice, I must say you have behaved very properly indeed, and shown great discretion, and I am very much pleased with you;—of course, Mr. Bryant is a very good match for you, perfectly unexceptionable in every respect, but I shall not let him think he is to have you for the asking; it will not do to seem too keen about him; men are all quite set up enough in their own esteem; and of all things a young woman must never let her real sentiments appear;—the best of men are not to be trusted—they are our natural

enemies, and always ready to take advantage of any thing they see in their favour;—so, my dearest love, just let me give you a hint never to allow him to feel too sure of your partiality. You are going to marry him, and that, as Dr. Gregory says, is quite a sufficient mark of preference. A little reserve and coldness makes a man's love burn all the more briskly; they never care for that of which they are certain."

"I am sure," said Alice, warmly, "that Mr. Bryant is a very different sort of man; I am confident that no one ever repented of trusting him."

"Well, well," replied her mother, kissing her and patting her cheek, "it is all quite right that you should think so."

At this moment the waiter appeared, bringing in a note for Mrs. Helmsby. She read it, and handed it to Alice. It was from Bryant, begging the favour of an interview with Mrs. Helmsby, at any time she would name in the course of the evening.

"Shall I say in half an hour, Alice?"

"Yes, mamma, whenever you think best."

Mrs. Helmsby and Mr. Bryant had finally an interview that evening, which concluded to their mutual satisfaction. Mrs. Helmsby had the supremest self-complacency in the manner in which she had acquitted herself. When she came to consider the matter, she was convinced that she had conducted it with the most sagacious diplomacy; she had concluded by telling Bryant that "she would never force her daughter's inclination, but that if he could succeed in winning the

affections of Alice, she had never seen the man to whom she would so willingly commit her happiness, though it would cost a great pang to part with such a dear companion," &c., &c. All which Bryant perfectly understood, and made the requisite assurances about "honour and happiness." He, of course, obtained permission to plead his cause with Alice, and the result was that when a few days afterwards they quitted Matlock, she was the affianced wife of Bryant.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALICE found her position at home materially changed for the better; she had become a person of importance, her desires and opinions were humoured in every way. Bryant, by sanctioning them, gave them quite a different aspect in her mother's eyes, who became suddenly enlightened on her daughter's merits, and began to fancy that they had never been duly appreciated by the circle of her acquaintance. She even began to suspect that she was superior to all the young ladies whom she had so perseveringly held up to her as models—to be sure, she was going to make a much better match than they had any of them achieved for themselves. It was not her mother alone, the whole neighbourhood began to regard her with deference, as the future mistress of a handsome establishment, and the dispenser of dinner-parties and dances.

It is unfortunate, but it generally happens, that people become sensible of our merits at the precise time when it is most a matter of indifference whether they do or not: possibly, to teach us that what we really *are* is the only

essential point whilst, whether we are admired is of very little consequence at all. It is difficult to become indifferent to the sympathy of those around us, it seems like the response of an oracle to sanction what we do; but, after all, sympathy is a luxury, and not a necessity; the natural craving we have for it had need to be carefully watched, lest it should degenerate into a sentimental vanity. We must all of us learn to lead our own life, according to the best of our ideas, and the best manner in which we can realise it, whether we have to encounter good report, or evil report. "The favour of man bringeth a snare," as wise King Solomon declared, long ago. The intense yearning after sympathy, and the habit of fancying all to be wrong which did not come with the sanction of other people's opinion, was the weak part of Alice's character, although the source of much in her that was delicate and graceful; it gave that confiding, clinging, beautiful helplessness, which was the fascination of her manner: but still it is *strength*, and not graceful weakness, that is to be desired: defects of character have often a beautiful aspect, and virtues present, in some points of view, the defects of their qualities.

Alice, however, had, for the present, found all that her soul had thirsted for so long. Bryant was several years older than herself, and whatever opinion he expressed came to her with the weight of authority. Every body who spoke of him seemed to regard him as a man of superior sagacity in all matters of business; she heard men quote his opinion to give weight to their own; his character

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stood high on all sides, so that she had no misgivings about his worth. The quiet impassiveness of his manner, mingled as it was towards her with a tenderness and gentleness that had a touch of the paternal in it, possessed a peculiar charm for her more demonstrative and passionate nature. There was a certain mystery about it—so much more was implied by his calm speech than the words expressed, and every word of affection seemed an inlet through which she discerned an infinite world of love lying beyond.

Under this new order of things she bloomed into fresh life and vigour; her faculties for the first time dared to assert themselves, and expand to their natural growth. She had an affinity with all that was beautiful and refined: without knowing what was meant by an *ideal*, she had unconsciously lived in aspirations after it. It seemed to her that the new life now opening to her would realise all her vague dreams.

Bryant was really become most sincerely attached to her; he listened with ready and admiring interest, as with a confiding shyness she poured out to him all the hoarded aspirations of her soul; he thought her very charmingly romantic, and he told her histories of his travels and of the incidents of his past life, to which she listened with Desdemona-like avidity, whilst he thought that when she grew older, and had seen more of the world, she would gain common sense, and “become more like other people.” Most fortunate was it for the safety of poor Alice’s dreams that he never gave this hope words!

Alice was terribly annoyed by being told on all sides that "she was going to make an excellent match." Had Bryant been the most insignificant of his own clerks, on a salary of a hundred a year, she would have rejoiced in the opportunity of proving to him that she married him for his own sake, and she was much afraid lest some of these speeches should come to his ears, and that he should take a disgust to so much worldliness. Her mother especially showed a disposition to drive in all things as good a bargain as possible. But Bryant perfectly understood the disposition of both mother and daughter; and whilst he behaved with the most profound civility to Mrs. Helmsby, and acceded to all her propositions, he registered a mental vow that there should be as little intercourse as possible with his dear mother-in-law when he was once fairly married!

He used all his influence to bring matters to a conclusion as speedily as possible; and, at length, that grand marriage preliminary, "making the wedding clothes," was put in hand.

Mrs. Helmsby had determined in her heart that her daughter should have the most splendid outfit that any bride on record had carried out of the town, and as many sempstresses and mantua-makers were set to work as would have sufficed to fit out all the heroes of the "Nibelungen Lied." She who had objected to letting Alice take drawing lessons on the score of extravagance, cheerfully spent thirty guineas on a Brussels lace veil, and felt no economical pang when she ordered a sumptuous sky-blue velvet dress, saying, "It would be so serviceable."

We are not going to give a list of Alice's "wedding clothes;" there is no precedent for it except in the case of Harriet Byron, who married Sir Charles Grandison; but we beg our readers to believe that it was a superb trousseau. All being prepared, the last flounce finished, and the last seal affixed to the settlements, the wedding itself was allowed to take place. Alice looked very lovely in her veil and wreath of orange-flowers; the wedding breakfast comprised "all the delicacies of the season;" and Alice and Bryant set off for a short tour through France and Switzerland.

Mrs. Helmsby was very much affected at parting with her daughter; but the necessity there was to clear away in safety all the additional glass and china, and to count up the silver spoons, proved a salutary distraction to her mind; whilst the proud anticipation of seeing Alice "sit for her company," prevented the present moment feeling gloomy.

In London a slight disappointment awaited Alice to temper the almost excessive flow of her happiness. Bryant found there letters awaiting him, the contents of which rendered his presence at home necessary, and put a stop to their projected tour; but he promised Alice that if he could snatch time in the spring she should still see Mont Blanc.

Alice, in the meanwhile, was very well contented, after a few days in London, to accompany her husband to the mining districts of Wales, whither his business called him, and to have a brief sojourn amid the minor grandeurs of Snowdon.

Bryant had an only sister, who, for some years, had kept house for him, until she married a wealthy man, with the finest house, the most extensive grounds, and the largest hot-houses and conservatories in the county. This sister had not been able to grace the marriage breakfast, as she was out of England at the time, but she had now returned, and a letter, which, after travelling for some days after Bryant, at length reached him, expressed her earnest desire that he and Alice should pay her a visit, as soon as they could arrange it. Bryant earnestly desired that his sister and Alice should like each other ; and, as there was yet a fortnight before their " at home," fell due, he thought they might as well spend it at his sister's house, which being only seven miles on the other side of his Works, would allow him to come to and fro without difficulty. Alice was rather dismayed at the prospect of encountering this sister, of whose elegance and importance she had heard so much ; but Bryant wished it, and it never occurred to her to object. Accordingly, Bryant wrote, accepting the invitation, and fixing the day for their arrival at Matching Park.

Mrs. Lauriston, Bryant's sister, was a woman of about six-and-thirty. Her figure had precisely that carriage and *en bon point* which people think essential to the reputation of being " a fine woman." She dressed always remarkably well, and might be called handsome, although her features were not regular ; her manners had a glossy suavity, which, at a little distance, looked very like kind-heartedness, whilst her voice had a tone

of good-humoured cajolery, which was rather pleasant than otherwise. She was, moreover, very well bred, and could have edited a manual on the abstruse points of etiquette.

She met her brother and Alice on their arrival at the head of the staircase. A glance at the graceful drooping figure of the latter, as she clung to her husband's arm, satisfied her, and she embraced her with a sufficient effusion of sensibility.

"My dear new sister, welcome to this house!—My dear John," continued she, giving a hand to her brother, though without abandoning Alice, "how happy you have made me! How I rejoice to see you both under this roof!"

"God bless you, my dear Margaret," said he, in a faltering voice. "May you and Alice ever be sisters!"

"That is my dearest wish," replied she, as she glided into her superb drawing-room.

Alice was bewildered with her emotions; she could not look round her; still she thought her sister-in-law very beautiful, and felt sure she should love her extremely.

Mrs. Lauriston narrowly scrutinised every movement of Alice, though she affected not to notice her shyness.

"Well, my dear, and what do you feel the most disposed to do?" said she, in a tone of friendly vivacity, "will you rest a little here, and take a little refreshment, or will you at once proceed to your dressing-room? We dine at seven; there will only be ourselves; I thought we should be happier alone; we have all our friendship

to make; though I do not expect to find much *ice* to break," concluded she, taking the hand of Alice with a smile, which displayed a row of the smallest and whitest teeth in the world.

Alice preferred going at once to her room.

"Well, then, my dear Bryant, you must excuse us awhile," said his sister, drawing the hand of Alice through her arm as she led her away.

Alice was conducted to the bed-room she was to occupy; it was sumptuously furnished with every thing that could be needed or dreamed of for use or luxury. It opened into a small boudoir dressing-room, fitted up *en suite*, and abounding in fanciful chairs, tables, and *chef-d'œuvres* of the art of upholstery : it commanded a lovely view of the park, and there was an opening, through which some hills were seen in the distance, which relieved the level richness of the ground near the house ; a stand of choice plants, and a book-case full of elegant-looking volumes, completed Alice's delight.

"What charming rooms!" she exclaimed. "I never saw any so pretty, it is like reading a novel to come into them!"

"I am delighted, if you are pleased, my dear Alice; I hope you will find every thing you need; I wish you to consider yourself at home."

This was a very kind speech and pronounced in a very sweet voice ; but Mrs. Lauriston had an absent look in her clear grey eyes, which were wandering over the flower-stand, and Alice felt the warm impulse to

express her thanks suddenly checked—she hardly knew how.

“I will ring for your maid, my dear,” continued she; “but do not make a state toilet, we shall be alone—and besides you are so pretty, that dress will be wasted. You will find me in the drawing-room; I will go now and keep poor Bryant company until you return to us.”

Before her maid arrived, Alice amused herself with inspecting her apartments more nearly; she seemed to breathe more freely in the atmosphere of refinement that surrounded her; her love of beauty eagerly caught at all that was in affinity with it. The exquisite taste which presided in the arrangement of the rooms, had subdued the richness of the decorations; the sense of their expensiveness was lost, and no thought of the upholsterer’s bill was suggested by them.

Alice’s mother had always been in the habit of spending a handsome income,—the chintzes, damasks, and furniture, were all the richest that could be got for money; still they conveyed no more meaning than when they were in their native warehouse—a dull, uninteresting *mediocre* look pervaded the whole house; the result was very inadequate to the money expended upon it. Here, on the contrary, a gay *fête*-like aspect glowed everywhere, combined with an air of elegant comfort, which made Alice fancy she had fallen upon the sort of home she had yearned after.

In the midst of all this, her maid appeared, and the business of dressing commenced.

“Well, Simmonds,” said Alice, “and what do you

think of this place? Have they made you comfortable down stairs?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, thank you. I am very happy indeed; this is just the pleasantest and beautifullest place I was ever at in all my life, every thing is so cheerful and pleasant—it is quite a comfort to be amongst it; my room is fit for a duchess, and the servants seem all very agreeable; and I am sure Mrs. Lauriston is every inch a lady, and so pleasant spoken! I met her as she was going to the drawing-room, she smiled, and hoped I would do all I could to make you feel comfortable and at home. I am sure I hope our house will be half as nice."

Alice listened to this tattle, and fell into a reverie wondering what her own home would be like. A sense of her own importance dawned on her for the first time, as she thought that she, too, was going to be the mistress of a handsome establishment, and would have as much money as she chose, to do whatever she pleased with it.

When Alice re-entered the drawing-room, it wanted but a quarter of an hour to dinner-time. Mrs. Lauriston was dressed, and looked, as Alice thought, like a duchess, in her rich black satin and Brussels lace.

"Come and sit here, my sweet Alice," cried she; "how lovely you have made yourself! really I think Bryant may feel very proud of his wife, at least *I* do of such a sister! We must be great friends, Alice. I shall not feel satisfied unless you love me very much."

Again the sweetness of this honey speech was marred by the expression of the speaker's eyes, which were

critically inspecting the make of Alice's dress. Alice timidly pressed her white dimpled hand, and thanked her for her kindness. The French clock struck seven, and Mr. Lauriston entered as it ceased. He was a grave, reserved-looking man, with a bald head, and a lean stooping figure; he wore a gold double eye-glass round his neck, and was dressed in a full suit of black; a white and beautifully plaited cambric frill peeped under his waistcoat, and joined his equally white cravat.

"My dear Mr. Lauriston, let me make you acquainted with our new sister-in-law," said his wife, presenting Alice as she spoke. "You know how often I have sighed for a sister, and now you see Heaven has heard my prayer.—Alice, my love, this is Mr. Lauriston, my husband, and your brother."

Mr. Lauriston made a low bow, shook hands with Alice—said he was very glad to see her, and proud of such an acquisition to their family—congratulated Bryant, who entered at that moment, on his wonderful good fortune in securing such a wife—and then, with the air of a man who has acquitted himself towards his creditors, he inquired from his wife whether the dinner were not behind-hand. The sound of the gong luckily obviated a reply, and, presenting his arm to Alice, he led her to the dining-room.

The dinner-table and the dinner were in equally good taste with all that Alice had yet seen. She was interested in watching the arrangements, and taking a lesson from all she saw, against the time when she

would have to preside over her own table. This occupied her attention, and prevented her feeling the element of heavy silence which Mr. Lauriston had introduced. He paid her all the requisite courtesies of the dinner-table; but he had the air of being always on his guard, and there was a weight of reserve and caution in every line of his face, which made his taciturnity quite portentous. It was impossible to utter a sentence under this influence, of which you could not feel certain whether it were dulness or wisdom; and it caused a mysterious sense of oppression in those subjected to it—an uneasy speculation as to what his thoughts were like—a point on which he was never known to enlighten any one. Even the bland *empressement* of his lady fell dulled and stagnant, like a stone into the Dead Sea, without causing a ripple.

It was the custom at Matching Park to retire to rest early. They had a short sojourn in the drawing-room after coffee; and then the wine and water and bed-candles made their appearance. Mrs. Lauriston accompanied Alice to her room, told her she was sure she was a prodigious favourite with her husband, and that she must not mind his being so silent, as it was constitutional; and after hoping that the next day would be fine, and that Alice would find her room comfortable, she embraced her once more and glided out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next day Alice was duly taken over all that was to be seen in the house and grounds. There is always a freemasonry amongst women about the mysteries of housekeeping and servants, and in recounting their several experiences. Alice naturally enough had none to impart, but she was a reverent listener to the household wisdom that fell from Mrs. Lauriston's lips; and her naïvely expressed admiration for all she saw gratified that lady extremely, who was well pleased to find that her pretty sister-in-law was not stiffened into notions of her own dignity, and evidently never dreamed of setting up any rivalry with Matching Park. With all her suavity Mrs. Lauriston had a pitiless insight into the shortcomings of others; her bright grey eyes could penetrate, like those of a cat, into the darkest corners; and she was not without the velvet paws, armed with sharp claws, to drag all she saw into the light, whilst she tossed and patted and tormented her victims with an air of such irresistible graciousness, that even they were in doubt whether she really meant to be disagreeable. But somehow it always

happened that whenever any one, seduced by the tempting softness of her manner, reposed any of their distresses in her gentle bosom, they invariably repented of having done so before the day was done—not that she made any particularly mischievous use of confidences, but there was an unfathomable reserve underneath her friendliness, and her eyes looked absently into space with a sweet smile at the very crisis of the communication. With all her *empressement* of manner, she had not a grain of enthusiasm; she was covered all over with a sort of moral glass-case, which kept her precious emotions fresh to the eye, whilst it protected them from all contact with trying realities.

“I really feel quite nervous as to how I shall get on with my house-keeping,” said Alice, when they were seated at their work-table, “and the idea of sitting for company has something terrible in it. I do not like to see people I do not care about.”

“If they are good acquaintances you need think of nothing further, very little liking will answer every purpose,” replied Mrs. Lauriston; “but you are such a dear, sweet, enthusiastic creature, that you will quite wear yourself out if you insist on liking all the people you know.”

“Ah! but I know the annoyance of living always amongst people who do not care for any of the things I do. I feel so happy now that I have some one to look up to and trust in, and to whom I may come for counsel whenever I am in doubt. Bryant will guide me in all I ought to do. Do you know that feeling of always

wishing to do right, and yet somehow feeling that you are always doing wrong?"

"How enthusiastic you are!" replied Mrs. Lauriston, with a vague smile.

"It is so delightful to belong to one who is wiser than oneself," said Alice, "one has such a sense of safety."

"My sweet Alice! you are talking like a girl in love! You will never manage your husband if you let him think he is wiser than you are! You will make yourself a slave directly; and if once you put such a notion of your submissiveness into his head, you will never be able to eradicate it. Husbands are always quite ready enough to believe themselves wise."

"But," replied Alice, "surely one's husband is always one's best friend?"

"My dear Alice!" cried Mrs. Lauriston, with vivacity, "a man can *never* in *any* relation be *really* the friend of a woman, and there is no good in trying to make a friend out of any of them; the best of them will take advantage of whatever you say or do. A woman must *never* trust a man: she may *seem* to do so as much as she likes, but woe to her! the instant she really lets him see or know any thing about her, except just as it *suits* her that it should be seen and known. Luckily, men always believe just what a woman tells them; they have no sense to see any thing for themselves, and they understand nothing but what is made visible to them."

"But," said Alice, "surely to one's husband one may think aloud; of course a married woman would never dream of making a friend of any other man."

"Well, my dear, try it, and see the sort of life you will lead for your pains. My dear Alice, you have married my brother, and what I am saying is quite as much with a view to his happiness as to your own. I have been married a long time, and I give you this piece of experience, never tell your husband, in an impulse of confidence any thing which there is a chance he may not admire; if at the moment he happens to be in a good temper, he may seem to stand it pretty well, but depend upon it he will recollect it against you on the first *accès* of ill-humour. Of course, I do not mean that you are to deceive your husband; I only mean to tell you, that as men only see things in the light they are put to them, you must be very careful always to present your facts on the *right* side. How should I live with Mr. Lauriston, who is reserved, suspicious, and *miserly*, to the last degree, unless I used great judgment with him? My brother is a different sort of man altogether; but if you pour out to him any of your romantic notions about love and friendship, it will make him think you childish, and he will never feel any respect for your judgment."

"But all this sounds very painfully," cried Alice; "am I to have no friend?"

"A woman ought never to make intimate friendships out of her own family," replied Mrs. Lauriston; "there are always family secrets which ooze out to one's 'dear friends;' they are confided in affection, and recollected in revenge, because, sooner or later, the best friends always quarrel; it is very silly to make

confidences, for our 'intimate friends' always have it in their power to say the bitterest things against us. If you are afflicted with an *épanchement du cœur*, it is not safe to indulge it, except to a mother, or a sister. I am talking frankly to you, because I can read your character; you will not make a bad use of it; and besides, I am endeavouring to save you, as I would endeavour to catch hold of a person whom I saw about to walk into a pond—if I could do it without risk to myself."

"I almost wish you had allowed me to fall into the 'pond' in peace, said Alice, "you have made me feel as if I had eaten of the 'tree of knowledge' and committed sin."

"Bah! my dear, you are a child. Men made their own laws; it is not our fault that they are suspicious, ungenerous, and selfish; if they choose to be such, we are obliged to take them as we find them, and make the best of them. But come, let us have a drive in the park, and do not allow your sweet face to look so perplexed; when you have lived in the world a little longer, you will find realities, 'things as they are' to be, of more importance than dreams of love and friendship. By the way, talking of love, what dress do you intend to wear, when you receive your company? If you have it here, I should like to see it. *Mais allons.*"

The painful impression produced by the foregoing conversation long depressed the spirits of Alice, and produced a sense of *guiltiness*, as if she had become

partaker in some vague undefined evil. The purity of her soul had been desecrated. She detested all she had heard; but she could not regain the happy, trusting unconsciousness, with which she had arisen in the morning. During their drive she was silent, and the admiration she expressed for the really lovely country was cold and flat. She was ill at ease with herself, and Mrs. Lauriston half repented the candour which had rendered her so uninteresting.

When Bryant returned, the first impulse of Alice was to tell him all that had passed between Mrs. Lauriston and herself, but she checked it instantly; she had no right to exhibit his sister in a disadvantageous light. She rejoiced in her reticence, when Bryant, breaking the silence her deliberation had caused, said:

“My dear Alice, I am delighted to see that you and my sister get on so well together. She is a most superior woman, and has an excellent judgment; there is no one to whose opinion I would sooner listen upon all matters within her reach. She has had a good deal of experience in society, and I think that, until you become accustomed to your new position, you had better go to her in any perplexity which may arise; in all matters of housekeeping, and household arrangements, I never saw her equal; in the midst of apparent profusion she is not without an elegant thrift.”

His speech caused Alice a strange annoyance, which she could not have explained to herself, much less to her husband. After a pause, she replied—

"I hope I shall always do what pleases you in all things ; but do you not think Mrs. Lauriston is rather worldly in some of her notions ?"

"What do you mean by worldly, my Alice? My sister Lauriston knows the value of outward things, and the goods of fortune ; she puts a just appreciation upon appearances ; she is not romantic, certainly, which is fortunate for her own happiness, but she has an excellent heart ; and you must agree with me, that a woman like Alice Bryant would have been wasted on a man like Mr. Lauriston?"

Alice smiled, and was comforted by this compliment.

Bryant continued. "Her husband is not the man I would have chosen for her ; it was a disappointment to me when she married him ; but she was always ambitious, and marrying for love would not have satisfied her. I do not think she sees his defects so clearly as others do ; any way, she fills her station with great propriety, and seems perfectly contented with it."

At this juncture the dressing bell rang, and there was no time for further conversation.

Alice was left to reconcile this new knowledge to her soul as well as she could. They remained a little more than a fortnight at the Park, in which time Alice had not succeeded in being able to love her sister-in-law. The elegance and refinement which at first had struck her so forcibly, came in the end to seem as circumscribed in their significance as her old environments at her mother's house.

An atmosphere of *self* pervaded all the details of

Mrs. Lauriston's life, making all things vulgar. Alice even began to sigh for her old familiar homeliness amid the cold elegance of Matching Park. She was uneasy at finding nothing in sympathy with the hidden world of her own heart, to meet no sort of recognition of those sentiments and aspirations which haunted her like gleams of a former existence. She felt chilled to the soul, in the midst of all that wealth and unbounded indulgence could procure of external enjoyment. She rejoiced in the prospect of going to her own home, where, at least, she hoped to be able to break through this circle of ice, and live with Bryant according to the dream of her own heart. At length the day of their departure came. It had been arranged that Mrs. Lauriston should return with them, to give Alice the support of her presence, through the trying ordeal of "sitting for company;" and also, to afford her judgment and advice on the arrangement of her visiting list, she being well acquainted with the various claims to consideration possessed by all the families in the neighbourhood.

Alice was, on the whole, rather glad of this. Nervously afraid of doing wrong, with confidence in every one's judgment rather than her own, she felt thankful to Mrs. Lauriston for undertaking the responsibilities of her social *début*.

The bridal party made their first appearance at church, to the great satisfaction of the whole congregation, who had been anxiously expecting their advent. The elegance and beauty of the bride, her superb Brussels veil, and

the stylish dignity of Mrs. Lauriston, earned unqualified approbation. Some who were disposed to raise objections observed, that Mr. Bryant was older than they deemed advisable for the husband of so young a creature; but that was not a point which could be rectified, so they considerably added the saving clause, that there was no accounting for tastes, and that elderly men generally made indulgent husbands. On the whole, the gossip that went on concerning them that day was marked by strong approbation.

Then followed that mysterious purgatory which is *de rigueur* in all civilised English marriages, "sitting for company." All went off extremely well; crowds of well-dressed people came in their carriages to the bridal levée, to look at Alice, to look at the house, to drink chocolate, to depart and criticise.

"Well!" said Alice, at the close of the second day, "white kid gloves and bride cake will seem to me like a bad dream realised, from henceforth. Oh, my dear Bryant, why can they not let people marry in peace, and be happy, without chaining it to such a leaden weight of obligation! What shall we do this evening to celebrate the conclusion of our toils?"

"The most advisable step would be, to eat our dinner in the first place," said Bryant, "and then I fear I must leave you for an hour. I have some business that is indispensable."

"Well, at least, I will never look bride-cake in the face again," said Alice; "and recollect, this business is

only to take you away for an hour—not one moment longer!”

“Is she not a sweet natural creature, Margaret?” said Bryant, looking after his wife as she left the room.

“Indeed she is,” replied his sister; “I quite adore her for her freshness; but she is not yet alive to all the advantages of her position in the world as your wife.”

CHAPTER XV.

CONRAD PERCY, and a college friend of his, were lounging down the principal street of M——, on a dusty, sultry afternoon in June.

“My dear Conrad!” cried his friend, “must we actually remain in this cursed place till to-morrow? We don’t know a soul, and are poisoned with the smoke. I vow I have not seen one decent man or woman since we arrived; every body is walking as if on life and death—there is nothing to look at, and we have nothing to do. I cannot make out what you are stopping for;—why cannot we go on to the Lakes to-night?”

“My good fellow,” replied Conrad, “don’t be so disconsolate—it makes me quite melancholy to hear you. I have told you at least a dozen times, that we must stay till to-morrow, because we got in after the bank was closed (it is one of their confounded holidays), and neither you nor I have money enough in our purse to pay our coach fare;—does that satisfy you?”

“Somebody could surely be found who would cash your check.”

"My dear fellow, these people of business would only see two plausible swindlers in dashing fellows like you and me. I don't know a soul in the town, and can give no reference—so just be peaceable, and don't grumble: it is of no *use* to rebel against destiny."

"Well," said the other, after a pause, "as people *do* live here, there must be something to live upon—I do not mean bread and cheese, but some sort of amusement—something to keep the soul from stagnating, or drying to brick-dust. Bah! do let us get out of this smoke; see! if we cross over the road it will pass over our heads—it is dreadful!"

"We certainly do not breathe

‘An ampler ether, a diviner air,’"

said Conrad; "but this smoke does something, streaming from that tall chimney. What do you say to seeing a factory?—it will help to pass the time."

"Well," replied the other, "be it so; but if the outside be so villanous, what will the interior be?"

They proceeded a few steps with this intention, when they were overtaken by a procession of equestrians from the circus, exercising their horses, and showing themselves. The band, in gaudy liveries, and sitting in a sort of open omnibus, were playing to the great delectation of a crowd of women and children, who came running out of every street. The two friends turned to gaze also, glad of any event to break their *ennui*. The *cortège* was brought up by a radiant-looking phaeton, and Conrad was startled by receiving an elaborate

bow from the very magnificently-attired individual sitting in it, and who, at the same moment, ordered the whole procession, in a voice of thunder, to "halt!"

"By Heaven, Conrad!" said his friend, "you have found an acquaintance at last. Who is it?"

"The devil knows," replied Conrad, in an annoyed tone; "let us move on."

"Oh, no!" said the other, "politeness for ever! We must not turn our backs on this Magnus Apollo, who has stopped his course and descended from his chariot to seek us."

Mr. Simpson, for it was none other, had by this time reached the two friends.

"My very dear sir," said he, offering to Conrad his dirty but dazzling hand, all covered with Birmingham rings, "permit me to rejoice in this unexpected meeting. I knew you instantly. I never forget a face I have once seen, and yours is not one to be forgotten, even without the interesting occasion of our first meeting. Your *protégée* has done you credit—she has real genius. She is not with the troop to-day; but you will honour us in front to-night. All the officers patronise us with their presence to-night; you are come at a fortunate time. Your *protégée* will be enchanted. She has often asked whether we should go to where you live. She is a wonderful girl."

In the course of this voluble discourse Conrad had recollected without difficulty the hero of the "sanded parlour."

"Ah!" said he, with as good a grace as he could

assume, though sorely annoyed at the publicity of the thing, "I hope the little Italian is well. Is she still a dumb girl, or have you taught her to speak English? Is her mother alive still?"

"My dear sir, she is a genius. Most astonishing talent, and has kept herself perfectly respectable. I told you I would keep my eye upon her, and I have done so. But you will come and see us to-night. If you will tell me your hotel, I will have the honour of sending you half a dozen tickets, and will keep places in the reserve box."

A crowd had gathered by this time, to see what was going on, and to hear how circus people talked.

"Yes, yes," said Conrad, impatiently, and moving away, "I will not fail to come. But you need not take the trouble to send."

Conrad's friend, who wanted to plague him, said, quite loud enough to be heard, "Thank you, Mr. Simpson, send them to the Royal Hotel."

"You may rely upon me, my dear sir," cried Mr. Simpson, as he sprang upon his lofty seat, and gave the word to proceed, just as a policeman was crossing the road, and bid them "move on."

"Well, Conrad, and who is this Italian miracle? Faith, this delay has been more lucky than one could have hoped. I am dying to see what she is like."

"She was a young Italian girl," said Conrad, annoyed at his companion's tone, "whom I met with at an inn in the North, twelve months ago. She was in

great trouble. Her mother, who was mad, had fallen ill; and somebody they had come to England to seek, turned out to be dead; so you may fancy she was badly off. I helped the poor thing with a trifle of money, and made a bargain for her with this man, who also happened to be there. It was one way of gaining a living. She was little more than a child then — not fifteen; I wonder what she is like now. She was very interesting and modest-looking then; but she will have lost all that, I suppose."

"We will go and see," replied his companion. "Now let us go back to dinner, I am hungry; and now we have an object to look forward to, I don't feel half so bored as I did. How very little one wants in this world, and we do not get it!"

When Bianca learned the *rencontre* of the morning, she was, as we all are when we unexpectedly come upon our dearest wish, not half so glad as she expected; it threw her into a tumult of feelings she could neither express, nor understand, amounting almost to physical pain. At last, the true woman's instinct made itself felt; a woman's first impulse is always to dress for her lover, and out of the chaos of new sensations that bewildered her, one made itself speedily articulate, a determination to get a new dress out of the manager. There was not much time to manufacture it, but she was clever at inventing costumes, and very quick in a rough effective manner of realising them.

Mr. Simpson was in a capital humour, and very desirous that his *protégée* should appear to advantage, so

she found him in an unusually liberal mood, and obtained without difficulty an unlimited supply of white spotted muslins, silver tinsel, with some sky-blue ribbon, and a new pair of Greek sandals of a similar colour. Out of these materials, she achieved a costume that surprised even herself; she did not know what it was that had inspired her with a refinement and delicacy she had not dreamed of before; all that had hitherto contented her, now seemed mean and coarse, when brought into actual contact with one moving in such a different sphere. She felt for the first time to measure the distance between them, and her dress was contrived to meet what she fancied would be his taste; she looked forward with a sort of pleased dread, to showing him what she could do, and determined to excel herself.

Dressed in her fresh pure-looking costume, her magnificent black hair arranged so as to exhibit all its beauty, her cheeks too flushed with anxiety to stand in need of rouge, she made her entrance on the scene. Her eyes soon found out Conrad and his friend, when all her powers seemed suddenly to forsake her; she felt dreadfully frightened, and her impulse was to rush off the stage; though that was not possible, and, in a few moments, the effect of habit resumed its sway, yet she did not recover so far as to act so well as usual; she was constrained and embarrassed, and had not the *abandon* and earnestness which was her great charm; all she was saying and doing suddenly seemed to become so foolish and stupid, now that she fancied *him* listening to it. Mr. Simpson was provoked, but as

saying so would have made her worse, he prudently held his tongue.

The occasion which Bianca had so long looked forward to was now come ; but instead of the delight and happiness she expected, she felt more wretched and depressed than she had ever done in her life, and would gladly have sat down and cried.

After the first piece on the stage, came the scenes in the circle, in which she had a good deal of pantomime to do. Relieved from the insipid mawkish stuff she had been obliged to utter, her spirits began to rise, and she did herself more justice. Conrad and his friend were both startled by the power she showed. It was the sight of Conrad's face that restored her energy; she heard *his* applause as she passed round, and was up to the mark instantly.

"Upon my honour that girl has real talent," said Conrad ; "she will do something one of these days if she goes on."

He flung a moss-rose to her, as she passed beneath where he sat ; she made an effort, and recovered it, before it fell to the ground. The audience fancied it a *tour de force*, and applauded mightily, and other flowers were dropped by aspiring youths ; but Bianca had already disappeared behind the pink satin curtain.

"A glorious girl, in faith," said Conrad's companion ; "let us go behind and speak to her."

It was a scene even more motley by night than by day. But Bianca was not there, she had left the circus immediately on quitting the ring. Mr. Simp-

son, however, in a dress something between that of a footman and a field-marshal, came up to them, expressing regrets, and hopes, and fears, enough to have furnished a whole generation of the human race in times of ordinary vicissitudes ; winding up with—

“ Well, my dear sir, and what is your opinion of our protégée ? She was not in force to-night in the earlier part—she seemed frightened—the first time I ever knew her so. I think the idea of appearing before you embarrassed her. But she pulled up towards the last, I thought.”

Conrad and his friend paid all the expected compliments, not only to Bianca, but to the whole establishment.

“ Yes, sir,” replied Mr. Simpson, with complacent gravity, “ every man has some model he proposes to himself—Buonaparte is mine. I never accept excuses. I never allow my people to fail : and by expecting nothing less than perfection, I secure excellence, at least. He was a wonderful man, sir, Buonaparte ! I am generally supposed to resemble him in person, as it is my ambition to do in mind.”

“ It is equally striking in both,” said Conrad, with perfect gravity ; “ but I should like to see Ma’m selle Bianca. Do you know where she lives ? and at what time I should be most likely to find her to-morrow ?”

The manager felt an undefined fear, that an interview between Conrad and his protégée would end either in his losing her services altogether, or in being obliged

to pay a higher rate for them ; so he tried to evade the question. But Conrad persisted, and at last got the requisite information, with which he took his leave.

The next morning Conrad repaired early to the address he had received,—he went alone, as he did not choose his travelling companion to go with him.

As Bianca's salary had not been raised beyond the original twelve shillings a week, the lodging she and her mother now occupied was in no respect superior to the one we formerly described ; in fact, poverty had made inroads even on the few comforts they then possessed. It is no easy matter to keep two persons in food, clothes, and lodging, on twelve shillings a week ; her few trinkets had gradually been disposed of, to supply accidental deficiencies as they arose,—and her salary had been anticipated for several weeks. Poor Bianca was suffering under that most wearing of all human ills—*anxiety about money* ; that worst fruit of the tree of knowledge—the utmost value of a shilling ! It was about nine o'clock when Conrad went to visit her, and she was preparing breakfast. A cup of chocolate for her mother ; a little milk and water, with a slice of bread, for herself. Their small apartment was already swept and straightened for the day. Her mother, wrapt in a large shawl, sat in a rocking-chair beside the fire, still retaining traces of the beauty she had formerly possessed. Bianca was much grown since Conrad had last seen her ; but he was shocked to perceive, by daylight, that she looked gaunt and thin, as if she had not sufficient food. She was dressed in a pink

gingham gown, high in the throat; and a black apron, pinned to a point in front, showed her round slender waist.

She started so violently when Conrad, having knocked, entered, that she upset the whole of her breakfast; the blood rushed to her heart, which felt as if it would never beat again; and this girl, inured to appearing nightly before hundreds of spectators, stood with trembling limbs and downcast eyes before Conrad, unable to speak, unable to move a step.

"I could not leave the town, without informing myself of your welfare, mademoiselle," said Conrad, with a respect which surprised himself, "and I hope I have not come at an unseasonable hour. I am obliged to continue my journey in an hour, which must be my excuse."

All which Bianca had thought, felt, pictured to herself that she would say, when the opportunity of seeing Conrad should come, faded from her memory now; she could only stammer an invitation to be seated; the one glance, as she lifted her eyes to his face, and suddenly withdrew them, perhaps supplied Conrad with the true meaning of her abrupt and broken words, for he sat down quietly, and gave her time to recover herself. He addressed her mother (who looked uneasily at him) in Italian, and told her he had the honour to be an old acquaintance of her daughter's. She at first brightened a little at the sound of her native tongue, but her attention soon wandered, and she began again to rock herself. Bianca now found her voice, and expressed all the gratitude she felt for the services he had rendered her.

"I have long desired," said she, quietly, "for the opportunity of telling you this, and now that it has occurred, you see how awkward I am at expressing it; but there is not a day in which I have forgotten you."

Conrad could not reply by any common compliment; he felt too strongly interested in his protégée.

"Tell me how I can serve you further," said he; "by this time you must obtain a good salary, as you seem the principal actress and equestrian."

Bianca told him frankly how she was situated with the manager; that she had received more advantageous offers from other quarters, but that being in debt to Mr. Simpson she could not get free.

Conrad was extremely indignant. Every moment he felt a stronger interest in the young girl so strangely thrown on his humanity. He told her how much he had been pleased with her acting, and asked if she had no desire to take a higher walk in her profession.

It is the peculiarity of strong characters to know their own wishes. Bianca's embarrassment left her, as she candidly and frankly spoke to her friend of her position. She relied on him instinctively.

"I feel," said she, "capable of doing better things. I love the profession, but I would like to have better things to say, not be condemned to utter the trash of last night; but I have no books, no means of getting instruction; I desire beyond all things to enter a regular theatre, no matter in how humble a capacity. I would work upwards. I can speak English now, and I feel I could make my way."

"I thank you," said Conrad, "for speaking to me as a friend, for thinking of me as one; I will try to merit your confidence. I am obliged to go on northward to-day, but I shall return this way in a month, when I will see you again. I will in the meanwhile write to a friend about you. I will not lose sight of you till something is settled. You shall hear from me soon. Clear off all your scores with Simpson, and give him notice, but make no fresh engagement till you have seen me."

Conrad was about to give her a sufficient sum to allow her to work up her arrears of salary; but suddenly recollecting that he had not yet paid a visit to the bank, he was obliged to stop his speech in some confusion. He shortly after took his leave; but in less than an hour after his departure, Bianca received a parcel, containing a copy of Shakespeare in one large volume, and a note enclosing 5*l*. The note was as follows.

"DEAR BIANCA,

"I send you a trifle to free you from Simpson; the book you must study for my sake, and tell me about it when I return; till then think of me as your sincere friend

"CONRAD PERCY."

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE are moments in the experience of most people, which come unthought of, unlooked for, bringing a gush of deep joy that is like pain in its intensity—it is almost a *pang* of ecstasy. Such a moment was it to Bianca, when she opened Conrad's parcel and read the note it contained. What now to her was hunger or privation; she had received a talisman against all evil, that it should not come nigh her. The whole day passed in a feverish delight; and if, when with so little human prospect of meeting him, she had been devoted to the idea of Conrad, it may be judged whether she were not now confirmed in her allegiance to it for life and death! She expected no return, she thought of none, her own sentiment was so engrossing, so all-absorbing, that it left no room for considering whether Conrad returned her love or not. With the deep humility of a true passion, she did not venture to aspire to being beloved as she herself loved. He was a bright particular star, so far above her. She only desired to be allowed to worship him without repulse.

At the end of the week she signified to Mr. Simpson that she intended to quit his company. The worthy copier of Buonaparte was put into a royally Buonapartean rage, and found some difficulty in expressing himself adequately to his ideas of his character, and the occasion. At first he turned a glance he intended for annihilation, upon her; and then folding his arms, he desired her, with a sarcastic tone, to repeat what she had just been saying.

"I said," replied Bianca, "that Mr. Percy has promised to get me an engagement at a regular theatre, and that I wish to leave your company so soon as I shall have worked out the money you have advanced to me."

"So! it's all well, very well," said Mr. Simpson; "you cannot suppose you are necessary to me in any way, because you are not, the least in the world. It is for yourself I speak: to be near me, to learn maxims of your art, to hear what I say on the profession, was a great advantage to a young beginner like you, and I did think you appreciated it. I had better hopes of you, Bianca; but now to leave me in this shabby way for a regular theatre is what I did not expect; but all are alike—it is interest, and not art, that moves men; for the sake of a pitiful increase of salary, you can leave me, when you might go down to posterity as my favourite pupil!"

"But then posterity might say you half starved me, and took advantage of my necessities to drive the hardest bargains; so it is as well for your fame that I

should go whilst there *is* life in me. How much have you advanced me?"

After a few further expressions of majestic displeasure, Mr. Simpson descended to business. Mr. Simpson was not a dishonest man, at least he would not have allowed that he was; but he piqued himself on being a sharp "man of business" and driving a "keen bargain." Under the extenuating name of "business," there lies a debatable ground between honesty and roguery, amenable to its own laws of morality, and understanding no other.

After much grumbling at the shabbiness of Mr. Percy, in stealing away one of his troop, Mr. Simpson, with the sulky look of a much-injured man, agreed to give Bianca a written release for that day five weeks, which was just a fortnight longer than he had any real claim to her services for the money he had advanced.

Bianca was too happy in her own mind to raise objections to any thing. On her way home she invested a shilling of her small capital in paper, pens, ink, and sealing-wax, and was far more particular in the choice of them than if they had been articles of dress. Her first care was to arrange their small room, to make it look its best; then she dressed herself with as much *récherche* as her means allowed, and that was not much; but it was a woman's instinct to make herself look as well as possible, for the presence of her lover, and she felt as if she were going to approach Conrad. Her mother was knitting placidly in her arm-chair, beside the fire. *Her past* was erased from her memory; and she

had forgotten all the burning passionate love of her youth, with all the evil it had wrought her, and was utterly unconscious that her child was even now, for the first time, setting her foot on that enchanted ground, there to wander in wildernesses that have no way, and without a hand to guide her ! Though a complete wreck from what she had been, Bianca's mother still retained traces of loveliness—her figure was noble and commanding; but her imbecility had given an expression of aged childhood to her faded face; her magnificent eyes had lost their speculation, and gazed around with a stupid vacillating look, seeming to take note of nothing. She was dressed in a black stuff gown, with a white handkerchief round her throat; her hair, which was quite grey, was confined under a muslin head-dress, which Bianca had great skill in fashioning.

Bianca sat at the table under the window, her face buried in her hands; all the burning emotions, with which her heart was full, were unable to furnish her with a form of expression; and she was, besides, in such an intoxication of feeling, that she was carried away in dreamy beatitude, and could make no adequate effort to rouse herself even to the task in hand. Every word Conrad had spoken, every look and tone recurred to her, and the thrill of emotion when he had touched her hand to say farewell, all came back again and again; her whole nature was unlocked, and all the imaginative passionateness of her age and nature, was loosened from the torpid unconsciousness of girlhood, like a torrent which had been frozen at its

fountain by the blaze of the summer sun. There sat her mother, like a presence from the world of passion, to warn her against the perilous adventure towards which she was turning; but what availed it? What power had Bianca to profit by the monition? She had already come under the influence of the Enchanted Land, and must follow her fate. She had no longer the power to guide herself, if she had even retained the wish to return. At last she lifted her head, and dipping one of the pens in ink, began to write; but here a most mortifying difficulty presented itself; she had forgotten till now that she could hardly write a word, and all her exaltation of feeling was about to end in the pitiful production of a few cramped, straggling, and almost illegible lines. Under any circumstance the letter would have been difficult; now it was all but impossible. However, Bianca was not one to give up any thing so near her heart, and after spoiling four of her sheets of gilt-edged paper, she contrived by dint of printing the letters she found difficulty in writing, and looking out for the words she had to spell in her Shakespeare, at last to produce, if not a finished specimen of caligraphy, a reasonably legible and entirely original looking letter. It was very brief; she was surprised to find how little she really had to say; and when she had thanked him for his presents, and told him her arrangement with Mr. Simpson, she found all the rest must of its nature remain unutterable for her; so, out of all patience with what had cost her so much pains and labour,

and which bore no likeness to the glowing thoughts which filled her heart when she sat down to write, she folded her letter with tolerable neatness, and having directed and sealed it to the best of her ability, she put on her bonnet and took it to the post, and returned home full of anxiety, lest amongst the many hundred other letters, her precious venture should happen to be precisely the one overlooked, or lost, or mis-sent. Then she tormented herself as to whether she had addressed it rightly,—and finally, her memory, to comfort her, suggested all the rumours she had ever heard of mails being overturned, and post-bags lost or stolen. However, it duly arrived, and was placed on Conrad's breakfast-table the next morning. "Upon my honour I did not think the girl could write so well; that is not at all a vulgar letter, is it?" said he, tossing it to his companion.

"Ah, from your young protégée! I say, Conrad, don't turn her head, poor little thing; and, if I might turn Mentor, I should say, don't play the fool yourself. These sort of adventures are the devil for seducing one into mischief one never intended."

"No fear of that," replied Conrad, gravely; "and besides, my governor will have to recommend her—he has some theatrical connexion, and I shall turn the matter over to him. I must write to the old boy to-day, and it will be something to fill up my letter; he dearly loves what he calls the romance of real life."

Conrad did write, and the result was, that before her engagement with Mr. Simpson terminated, Bianca re-

ceived another letter from Conrad, enclosing a few lines, recommending her to the notice of the manager of the Theatre Royal in a neighbouring town. But, alas! nothing of the same kind is twice perfect. Conrad's letter told her he could not return through M——, and that he did not know when he should see her again; but he gave his address, and told her to write freely to him whenever she needed any thing. Bianca wept bitterly; she had been counting the days in the hope of his return, and she felt a chill disappointment at his speaking so calmly of the uncertainty of ever seeing her again. However, she wiped her eyes, and comforted herself with thinking of all the improvement she would have made when next they met.

She made a journey and carried her letter to the manager, and found him a cold, hard, dry man of business, without the least enthusiasm for the profession, but a keen judge of what was likely to take with an audience; a quick eye for the capabilities of his actors, but with no more feeling for them, no more sympathy either with their personal needs, or any aspirations they might happen to have for perfecting themselves in their art, than any of the stage properties or decorations might have had. If an actor showed available talent, and worked well, he retained him—so long as he was useful. He paid well where he was obliged, and screwed down every one who was not in a position to compel better terms. He had, moreover, the character of being very profligate in his conduct towards women; and several very bad stories

were whispered about his heartless conduct towards young women who had belonged to his company. Such was the worthy master to whom Bianca was recommended.

She knocked at the door of his room with a trembling hand, and was bid to come in, by a tall, portly, rather good-looking man, who was swinging back in a chair, before which stood a table covered with green baize, and strewn with letters and papers. As Bianca advanced he looked at her with an air of deliberate insolent criticism, like a man who considered himself a connoisseur in female charms.

Bianca, without speaking, presented her letter.

"So!" said he, tossing it down after he had read it, "you desire to enter a regular theatre, it seems. How long have you been with Mr. Simpson, and what sort of business have you been accustomed to?"

Bianca replied in as few words as possible, for she felt excessively annoyed at the impertinent familiarity of his look and manner.

"Can you recite any thing to give me an idea of your talent? Can you repeat one of Calista's speeches, for example?"

Bianca was obliged to confess she could not.

"Well, then, is there no passage in some of the plays you have acted?"

"They are such trash, at the best," said Bianca,

"that any passage separated from the scene would sound sheer nonsense ; but I think I could repeat some bits out of Shakespeare."

"That will serve excellently well. Begin anywhere you like, for I have not much time to spare."

Bianca, with some trepidation, and a feeling of shame, as if she were revealing her heart's secret, began to repeat the soliloquy of Helena, in "All's well that ends well." It was the only passage she could think of at the moment, and the manager was impatient.

She repeated it with so much delicacy and tenderness that the manager was taken by surprise.

"Come," said he, when she had finished, "if you do as well as that always, you will be sure to get on; but you have a great deal to learn, and nearly all the women's places are filled up; but, as you come recommended by an old friend, I don't like to refuse you. I cannot flatter you that you are worth much at present; but, however, if you like to agree for eighteen shillings a week, to act in any thing you may be put to, why I will see if I can find something for you to do. But, remember, there is to be no picking and choosing, or grumbling; you are to act any thing you may be wanted for, and you must not expect to be put into leading parts at first."

Bianca expressed her willingness to accede to this arrangement; and, after a few further remarks, the manager dismissed her, with an intimation that he

would send her a part to study, and let her know when the piece was called for rehearsal.

Bianca had now obtained her wish; she was engaged at a regular theatre, but she did not feel so elated as she had anticipated; in her dreams she had overlooked all the wide desert of subordinate drudgery she would have to traverse; she had grown accustomed to being the first person in Mr. Simpson's company, and she felt a discouraging chill, for a short time, at finding herself at the very bottom of the ladder, and feeling herself dwarfed, as it were, to nothingness, standing beside the immense task her ambition had prompted. But her spirit soon rallied; and she made a solemn resolution that no difficulty should present itself to which she would not oppose at least as much resolution and patience as should be necessary to combat it; that she would turn aside from no drudgery, take offence at no professional humiliation, but keep her eye steadily fixed on her own purpose; and that purpose was to rise to a leading rank in her profession.

When it came to the point, she was very sorry to leave Mr. Simpson, who, in the main, was a reasonably worthy man, though he had so pitilessly screwed her down in the article of salary; still she might have been with many worse people. He was sorry to part with her, for he had a regard for her, quite independent of her usefulness to him.

"Well, good bye, Bianca," said he, when she took leave of him. "I wish you well; and if this theatre

scheme does not answer, remember, you can come back to us. You are high-minded, like all young people; but if you get a fall, and wish to come back, you can."

Bianca thanked him, and they parted on cordial terms.

CHAPTER XVII.

“THE Prince of Darkness is a gentleman,” and therefore we do not believe he ever made the noted saying attributed to him, that “It is better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.” No gentleman would have thought such a thing; only some poor, tenacious, low-bred individual, who feared to have the shine of his own little rushlight eclipsed, if he ventured into better lighted society, and therefore cultivated the dusk, *pour se faire valoir*. Satan has been slandered, he never adorned himself with such a piece of pinchbeck sublimity. Still we are free to confess, that it is trying to human vanity to emerge from a scene of small triumphs, from the village where one may have been Cæsar, to take a place in the awkward squad of raw recruits, and submit to be drilled, and caned, and disciplined, with hope of making oneself a regular soldier—of becoming, not a commander-in-chief, but only one in a regiment where there are a thousand as good as ourselves—and being able to believe, that, though we

may not be distinguishable to the naked eye of indifference, still we have been made partakers of a better order of things. A person who can submit thus to efface himself, must have something really valuable in him, and the probability is he will come to shine on his own account some day; but that is the accident, not the element, of his aspirations. To become better, to become excellent, is what he seeks—the rest is as God pleases.

Bianca had the strength to be capable of this. She had long been the first person in Mr. Simpson's company, and now she had to find herself less than insignificant. No one taking the smallest interest in her, all the good places filled up, she was reduced to being a brick in a wall—just preventing an unsightly gap, that any one else could have filled just as well. The first part sent to her was that of a pert chambermaid in a little after-piece; it did not consist of more than two dozen lines, and for sense and meaning it fell far below any of her circus parts. However, she learned it, and determined to make the best of it.

But when she went to rehearsal, she found herself like a child in a strange school. Nobody condescended to take any notice of her. Some of the performers looked at her with supercilious contempt; the women whispered and tittered together, and laughed maliciously at her mistakes in the stage business. The man with whom she had her scene, swore at her for spoiling one of his points, by looking the wrong way at a curtain. None had the good nature to give her any available

directions. Some of the men looked boldly and insolently at her, and in a manner that made Bianca strongly disposed to resent it on the instant. She felt degraded and insulted, and thought with regret of good Mr. Simpson, and the rough good-will of her old companions; and she missed the beautiful horses dreadfully; none of the people about her seemed half such Christians! She went home miserable enough from this her first rehearsal in a regular theatre, and a Theatre Royal into the bargain. Men are naturally, and from instinct, in a state of mutual war with each other; go into what society one will, we shall find the ranks serried against us, unless we take with us influence to cause a place to open for us, or strength to force one for ourselves: for it is the latent power that lies within us, to obtain what we desire by force, if need be,—the being able to fight for ourselves,—which alone gets us any respect in the world. No mildness, nor amiability, nor goodness will stand us in any stead, unless the power to make ourselves *felt* and *feared* in an extremity, makes itself apparent through all the beautiful sky-blue haze of amiable qualities. Bianca had no place as yet; but she intended to make one.

At night, however, she met with a glorious compensation, which made all the annoyance of the morning as dust in the balance. The leading actor of the day, the head of the profession, was then fulfilling an engagement in the theatre; this happened to be one of his nights. The play was "King Lear." Bianca stationed herself at one of the sides. She had

never seen real acting before. If she had felt a love for her profession when she had only a vague instinct of its capabilities, what wonder that she became passionate when she beheld it in one of its most superb manifestations ! She stood like one entranced, leaning against one of the side scenes ; she felt a new life awakened within her ; but all feeling about herself, all thought of herself, was absorbed in the awe and reverence with which she regarded this revelation of the invisible powers of art. It was a glimpse of the supernatural ; she was baffled in her attempt to comprehend it ; her powers of body and mind gave way under the intense excitement ; she sank on the ground and leaned her head against one of the scenes, half-drowned in a flood of passionate tears that welled up from the deepest depths of her soul—such as can be only called from their source by the Divine soul shining into our hearts, and giving us a glimpse of ineffable things that no man may utter. An ocean, cloven to its depths, seemed revealed for an instant before her eyes, and she sank like a weed upon the brink of what she dared not gaze on. Her tears brought her back to her mortality, and relieved her from the oppressed and overwrought state which, if it had continued, must have brought on serious illness. We are girt round with weakness, and this very weakness is the refuge and defence of humanity, as well as its limitation.

The actor, who had been the means of thus rousing her, had to pass in one scene close beside her, and he was startled at the expression of her countenance ;—a

priestess listening to an oracle would have had a similar look. He addressed her, but she could not reply. He had the soul of an artist, and could recognise the spirit that was stirring within her. He was obliged to leave her, to enter on the scene. But this man, who dedicated his whole life to the art, felt that, in the dumb admiration of this young, unformed girl, he had received the highest homage that had ever been paid him; and he felt, too, that to have had the privilege of kindling that young spirit, by revealing to her the first glimpse of excellence, was a transcendent reward for the life-long toil he had dedicated to his art.

After the curtain fell, he looked to see if she were still there; and going up to her, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said, gently:

"You, too, have greatness in your heart; let nothing discourage you in your course."

Bianca did not attempt to reply, but she seized a corner of his dress, and raised it reverently to her lips, and withdrew.

"Who is that striking-looking girl?" he inquired of the man who had played Edgar, and who just then came by.

"I don't know; some body St. Leger picked up in the circus, I heard; he has always an eye for good-looking subs. I never saw her before to-day, so I suppose she is a fresh importation."

"He has shown his judgment," said the other, coldly; "she will make a noise in the world some of these days, or I am much mistaken."

Whenever our feelings have been at all exalted for a little while, we are sure to be thrown down to earth again with a rude shock;—we have dreamed that we were flying, and we awake falling. Bianca had to dress for her part in the farce; the emotions of the last few hours had completely driven it from her memory, she was in a sort of waking sleep, and until she found herself before the curtain, she never discovered that she could not say one word!

“I have forgotten all!” said she, in a voice of dismay to the man who was acting the part of a fine gentleman’s gentleman.

“Confound you, for a fool,” replied the man; “you will spoil my point. You were to coquet me;—your first word is that it is a long time since you saw me.”

“Oh-h!” said Bianca, making a desperate effort, and a dim glimmering of her part came to her. In the circus she had often been obliged to improvise dialogues, of which the situations only had been indicated, and this stood her in good stead now; luckily, she recollected her companion’s point, and gave him besides an opportunity of making another, so that his alarmed dignity was composed.

“You got out of that devilish well, let me tell you,” said he, when they came off; “but I would not advise you to play any more of those tricks—they won’t answer.”

The next night there was no great play, Bianca had not her attention distracted from her own business,

and she found one place was more like another than she had imagined. But evening after evening, so long as his engagement lasted, she stood in her old place, drinking in every word, and look, and movement of the great actor, until her whole soul was filled and saturated with noble conceptions.

The last evening that he acted, after the curtain dropped, he went up to Bianca and said kindly—"My good young lady, I should much like to befriend you; you have that about you I like to see in young beginners, and you will be heard of some of these days if you persevere. But you have a great deal to do, and much to learn, and many bad habits to unlearn. It will take you at least five years before you have mastered the mechanical part of your art, and all your life long you will find work before you; but for at least five years you must drudge—you have strength and patience, and let no difficulties make you distrust your aspirations,—they are the voice of God, you must have faith in them. When you are fit to be removed, you shall find a friend in me. I am old enough to be your father, therefore let me give you one caution,—on *no* pretence entangle yourself with obligations to the manager; endure any hardships, but accept no benefits from him. Will you promise me this?"

"Indeed I will," said Bianca, gratefully, "and without asking *why* you say so."

"There's a good girl," said the actor; "it will be some months before I am here again, and now let me

see what progress you will have made." He shook hands with her kindly and cordially, and Bianca went home feeling so strong and proud, that difficulties were things she could not believe in—she felt sure of achieving all things!

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Alice and Bryant had returned all their visits, and attended the requisite dinner-parties and evening-parties, the time at length arrived when they might sit down in peace in their own house, as Alice hoped, and lead the life she had so often sighed for, beside a being older, wiser, and better than herself, who would love her as much as her heart desired, and be her guide in all things.

The home of which Alice had now become mistress, was a large, handsome, old-fashioned, country house, situated in a fine park-like enclosure, about a mile and half from the nearest town, but not a trace of its smoke could be seen under the shade of the fine old trees, which were thickly planted around. The entrance to the house was up a wide carriage-drive, planted on each side with chestnut-trees. The house itself was picturesque-looking, of dark red brick with stone copings, presenting a long façade of gable ends, nearly covered by a luxuriant growth of ivy; it had once upon a time been moated, but that unwholesome piece of feudal state

had long since been filled up and converted into flower-beds. Within, the house still retained its old-fashioned rambling aspect, long galleries, odd passages, and rooms stuck in all manner of bewildering places ; but whilst the distinctive character of the house had been retained, all the innovations of modern comfort had been carefully and judiciously introduced under the auspices of Mrs. Lauriston ; the contrast between the close-fitting windows, the patent grates, and commodious furniture, with the wild rambling look of the building, was quaint and pleasant. Beautiful hot-houses and a conservatory, filled with choice plants, had been erected by Bryant to please his sister ; and although the establishment was on a much more unpretending footing than Matching Park, still Raven Hall (as Bryant's place was called) had a remarkably pleasing and auspicious aspect.

To outward eyes Alice had not a care or a sorrow, and she herself fancied that she was going to be perfectly happy. Bryant was deeply attached to his young wife, but he was not a demonstrative man ; his sister had never cared for any expressions of attachment, and therefore, he had not acquired the habit of using them ; but Alice had a gentle and loving nature ; to her, kind words from those she loved, were of far more value than kind *deeds*, an idiosyncrasy common amongst women and children.

Bryant had weighty business concerns on his mind ; the temporary interruption caused by his marriage, had induced an accumulation of urgent affairs, which

now occupied a more than ordinary share of his time and attention, so that when they subsided into the ordinary routine of domestic life, Alice was left very much to herself; the daily guidance and sympathy, from which she had anticipated so much comfort, by no means occurred to Bryant as either necessary or desirable; he had never been used to any thing but the decided, unwavering, manners of his sister, and would almost as soon have thought of regulating the amount of her food, as of giving Alice any sort of counsel about the employment of her time. He desired that she should be happy, and enjoy herself, provided the latter did not imply that he should be expected to visit a great deal, or to see people who were not connected with his business; otherwise, she might do what she liked, go where she liked, and spend as much money as ever she pleased. But what Alice asked was sympathy and guidance; she did not care for indulgence.

One of her earliest fears in her married life, was lest she should not acquit herself well in her house-keeping. She was haunted with the dread that she should not make Bryant so comfortable as his sister had done, and also, lest she should spend more money than had sufficed during the dynasty of her sister-in-law.

"My dear Bryant," said Alice, one morning, in a deprecating tone, as Bryant, with his letters in hand, was preparing to depart, "have you five minutes to

look over my housekeeping-book for the last month? I am afraid you will think I have spent a great deal, but I could not manage better."

"Why need I look at the book?" replied Bryant. "I am very busy this morning. Can you not add up a simple row of figures, and tell me how much money you want?"

"But I should like to know whether you approve of what I have done; and to be sure that you do not think me more extravagant than your sister used to be."

"My darling! do not be fantastic. What does it signify whether you spend a pound more or less in the week, if you are comfortable? I have never refused you money yet, why, therefore, do you persist in quoting my sister, as if she had been a first wife? It is childish, all this. I have plenty of book-keeping at the works, and do not wish to have the house-book on my hands besides. How much do you want, that I may bring it at dinner time? Will fifty pounds do?"

"Oh yes, the half of that. But tell me, have I vexed you?"

"Oh dear, no. How can you think so?"

"But *do* you love me?" persisted Alice, half crying.

"Why Alice, what *is* the matter? What can I have done to make you doubt it? Are you ill?" said he, anxiously. "Come, tell me, what is the matter; is it because I refused to add up your sums for you? Come, do not be a baby—give me the book, and let me see." He good-humouredly resumed his seat and drew to the table. "Why, you keep your accounts beautifully,

Alice! and they are added right to a fraction; there is no need for me to go over them. Now let me make a memorandum of how much you want."

"But have I spent more than Margaret used to do?"

"You know best, my love; but I really cannot stay to enter on the chapter of Margaret's economy; my time is too precious, and too short. I shall be in to dinner as usual. You had better take a drive this fine morning."

He once more took up his hat, gave Alice a hasty kiss, and mounted his horse, which had been waiting for ten minutes. He put it to the gallop, and was out of sight almost directly. Alice looked after him with tearful eyes. "He never turned his head," sighed she. "It is the first time he ever omitted to look back at me. What can I have done?"

She sat down listlessly to practise some new music; but the thought of Bryant's coldness recurred again to her mind, and she finally burst into tears. She had the comfort of shedding them all without remonstrance; and after she had made herself sufficiently miserable, by thinking over every possible and impossible cause of annoyance which she might have given, she became more calm. But she was destined to endure a real disappointment. A short note was brought to her from Bryant, telling her not to wait dinner, as he should not be home, having missed some parties on business by a few minutes, whom he had now to meet elsewhere. Alice felt a twinge of conscience, to think that the ten minutes she had detained him in the morning had been the cause of this *contretemps*.

She remained alone until late in the evening, and when Bryant at length arrived, he looked harassed and weary. Alice placed his slippers, and made the tea, which had been brought in an hour before.

"Why, Alice, how could you be so foolish as to wait for me so long?" said he; "another time, always dine or drink tea as the case may be, without waiting for me. I am very uncertain, and am often detained when I least expect it. You will have your house completely upset if you depend on my return at stated hours."

"I should prefer going without dinner and tea altogether, to having them without you," said Alice.

"That is talking nonsense," replied Bryant: "it is only foolish people who do not conform to necessary circumstances."

He relapsed into silence, and regarded the fire with an air of gloomy thought.

"You are very silent," said Alice, at length, trying to speak cheerfully, "have you nothing to tell me?"

"No, nothing at all—I have been seeing people and talking all day, until I am quite weary."

After another long pause, during which he seemed to have become utterly unconscious of her presence, he suddenly said:

"Alice, you are looking very pale; you had better go to bed; I must sit up for some hours yet. I have brought home some accounts that must be gone into to-night."

"And you so wearied!" cried Alice, sympathetically. "Cannot I help you at all, write down from your

dictation? Let me at least sit beside you; I will not speak a word."

"No, love, no, I must be alone; good night."

He lighted her candle, and opened the door for her; and almost before it closed, he had become absorbed in a heap of perplexed-looking papers. The next morning he was up early, and ready to depart before Alice was dressed; he called to wish her good bye, but before she could reach the hall-door, he was almost out of sight.

Alice was perplexed and miserable for the whole day, and could not get rid of the fancy that he was displeased with her for detaining him on the previous morning. Bryant returned to dinner, but his presence brought little comfort to Alice; he continued silent and reserved; never speaking, except to reply to a question, and then evidently with unwillingness. Poor Alice had three days of silence, perplexity, and tears; which last, however, she had the good taste to keep entirely for her own private solace; but she was beginning to look pale and very miserable, when on the fourth day Bryant came home a different man! He was lively, talkative, cheerful, and it seemed as if a heavy cloud had been dispersed from his aspect. He observed for the first time, on looking at Alice during dinner, how changed she seemed.

"My dear Alice," said he, when they were alone, "has any thing distressed you? Have you heard any bad news? Tell me what is the matter," continued he, tenderly.

"There is nothing the matter now, dear Bryant,"

said Alice, trying in vain to restrain her tears; "but you have been so gloomy and silent of late, that I feared you were displeased with me, and did not love me as formerly."

"My dear child, why will you take up with such fancies! You have had a narrow escape from something that would have been really distressing! For the last few days I have felt great anxiety about some accounts which had arrived from our Iſon Works in Silesia, and I feared my presence there would have been required. It would have been impossible to take you along with me, and I must have left you for, perhaps, some months. Happily, this morning we have received fresh advices, and all may be arranged without me. Whenever you see me silent as I have been, you must not think me unkind. Be sure that I always love you. Whenever you vex me (which I do not believe is in your power), I will tell you. Trust me, Alice; and never doubt my affection, because I do not make a demonstration of it. I have many things to harass me; I am very sorry any thing disagreeable should result to you from them, but you love me well enough to bear with me; and will you not do so without making yourself miserable, and me also? for it is very distressing to me to think I have given you pain."

"But I wish you would tell me what annoys you, and let me share it," replied Alice; "any anxiety would be preferable to the fear I have suffered the last few days, lest I had displeased you."

"My darling! you could not share the worries of

business with me. I cannot speak of matters at the time they are pressing on my mind ;—no, my love, there is nothing for it but your kind forbearance. I know it must annoy you; but I feel very grateful for your sympathy, though I may not seem to notice it. Now, kiss me, and promise that you will never needlessly torment yourself again.”

Alice gave the kiss and the promise ; but it was beyond her power to keep it. Although this explanation seemed, at the time, as if it must comprehend in itself all future misapprehensions that could possibly arise, still, on every succeeding period of gloom or reserve there seemed a speciality, which prevented the self-tormenting Alice from deriving any comfort from this compendious assurance.

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. HELMSBY had never been to visit her daughter, although Alice had now been married more than six months. Alice had divined Bryant's dislike to his mother-in-law, although he had carefully abstained from saying any thing disrespectful. However, it was a duty that could not in decency be deferred any longer; accordingly Bryant told Alice that he thought she ought to write and invite her mother to spend a month with them, now that the country was looking so beautiful. The letter was accordingly written, and a gracious acceptance returned. Mrs. Helmsby was to arrive early in the following week, and Bryant had arranged to leave home to transact some indispensable business. It was earlier than he had intended to go; but he would thereby shorten his own maternal penance, and avoid leaving Alice alone. Alice was rather glad of this arrangement, as it relieved her from the embarrassment she always felt when her mother and her husband were in presence; and, much as she was disposed to think Bryant always in the right, she rejoiced

extremely at the prospect of seeing her mother, and receiving her in her own house. Nothing in this world ever occurs exactly as we plan it. Mrs. Helmsby caught a severe cold, by imprudently going out to do some shopping on an extremely wet and cold day; and on the day she ought to have set off for Raven Hall she was confined to her bed. She grew so much worse, that Alice was sent for. Bryant accompanied her, and for three weeks she remained beside her mother, uncertain whether she would live or die. At length a slight change for the better took place, and Bryant insisted on her coming home with Alice. She never completely rallied, but lingered on until the beginning of winter, and then died.

Her death caused a blank in the existence of Alice, which could hardly have been expected from the uncongenial nature of their characters. But it was the loss of a daily solicitude, an object which employed her whole time, and took her thoughts away from herself and her own sensations. After the first natural grief had subsided, a weight of depression fell on Alice, which no effort could shake off. Her husband was at this time necessarily much absent, and did not remark it; he was, besides, so much accustomed to his wife's "fancifulness," as he called it, that he had come to consider it as a tax, which he had to pay for her many excellent and charming qualities. He was essentially a practical matter-of-fact man, and had no conception of the morbid sinking of heart and deadly sadness which so easily beset imaginative temperaments, whose owners are not subject to

the stern tonic of the *necessity* to work. Alice sank under the weight of a golden leisure, which she had not the energy adequately to employ. Worldly prosperity is a much greater drain upon our energies than the most severe adversity; there is no spring, no elasticity; it is like walking through life upon a Turkey carpet. Large and noble faculties are required to make a wise use of worldly prosperity; there is little stimulus in, and no excitement beyond, what the individual can furnish for himself; his days are rounded with security, and softly cushioned against all the harsh realities of life.

To the outward eye the contrast between the lot of the half-sisters is painfully glaring. The one, surrounded with all that makes life pleasing, and the precious possession of a strong enduring affection to give a value to all things.

The other, struggling with poverty, leading a life of hard labour, with the prospect of the workhouse if sickness or accident should disable her; suffering all this for no fault of her own, but inheriting it in consequence of the wayward, impetuous, ungoverned conduct of her parents, who had rushed upon responsibilities which they were not prepared to fulfil; with no one's affection to feed and stimulate her with words and looks of sympathy; alone with her own lot, to wrestle with it as she may; a helpless mother dependent upon her exertions, none to guide or counsel—none to care whether she should stand or fall.

But “a man's *life* does not consist in the abundance

of things which he possesses." We could none of us live, if we had not some hope, into which we may open the actual *present*. If our *life* were really no more than there is made manifest in the passing day—in the things that occur, the small details by which one day is carried into the next—it would be such a poor mean affair, that no one would have courage to live out half his days. But the most prosaic amongst us, unconsciously idealise it. "The things which are *seen*, are not made from those which do appear,"—and although nothing may distil from the unseen well of life within us, except common place days filled with ordinary business—still we instinctively feel that *they* are not our *life*: there is an ideal possibility of some latent power within them, which gives them a value beyond what they actually achieve. Every action we do, means more than it says;—it is the symbol of some thought, some hope, some effort. If we were built up in our daily life, and all glazed over to the smooth compactness of surface into which our actions are set each in its own place—meaning neither more nor less than the mechanical result of the concurrence of certain pitiful necessities—the spirit of life would be stifled out of us;—we should become dead jars of clay, instead of aspiring, palpitating, living human souls. No matter how mean or trivial may be the occupations which are appointed to us,—we can work at them with courage and perseverance, so long as we do not feel condemned to them as the "be all and the end all," the *realisation* of our *life*,—so long as there is a side on which we may escape

from that which is seen and definite, into that which is unseen and infinite. It is the being condemned to live with those who lead mechanical lives—lives without significance—who see in the daily routine of household business, in the daily occupation of going to the mill, the counting-house, and the different works of life, nothing but modes of filling up days and weeks, called in the aggregate *life*,—without an idea of looking round—much less *beyond*,—it is *this* which drives passionate souls mad; but if there be one opening through which the air from the everlasting universe of things may breathe upon us, we can feel strong and cheerful—no matter how bare of material comforts our lot may be.

This was Bianca's supreme blessing, which rendered all the hardships of her lot as dust on the balance. Alice, on the contrary, was hemmed in by people who cared for none of these things. She had not confidence enough in her own yearnings to make a way for herself; she did not sufficiently believe in her own aspirations to incur the comment, and censure, and want of sympathy of those around her; she endeavoured, instead, to make herself like to them, to feel satisfied with what satisfied them; she was haunted by a dull sense of self-reproach, she was divided against herself, weak, helpless, and dissatisfied. She was naturally religious,—had a deep sentiment of reverence and dependence, and might therefore have taken refuge in religion; but even that had been rendered so mechanical, that she saw no beauty in it that she should desire it;—she believed as she had been taught, because she was too timid to

doubt the penalties which she had been told attached to disbelief; but her heart obstinately refused its sympathy, it remained cold and unimpressed. The mysteries of religion, as made visible in books of theology, are rendered frigid and mechanical; men are forbidden to believe any thing, or to hope any thing, but what is already written. The future life is mapped out as definitely as the life which now is; orthodox monotony has attempted to strip even death of its mystery, by dogmatising on the realities which are to succeed it. The mephitic atmosphere of scepticism, is a relief from this;—we at least breathe more freely. We rush out into the wilderness, to obtain at least the liberty of wandering without meeting on every hand straight narrow paths, hedged in by sharply asserted limits; to feel ourselves free to indulge in our own hopes and fears without dictation.

Why do men so earnestly seek after pleasure, as it is called? It is because they, for the time, get into a certain idealised element. They go to dinners, balls, soirées, dramatic entertainments, with a certain *hope*; they know not for a certainty who or what they will meet with. A preparation—an incantation has been made to bring them together, and they go to seek they know not what.

CHAPTER XX.

TIME passed on, without any remarkable occurrence. Bianca continued her humble course ; small parts were cast to her in every thing that chanced to be played,—tragedy, comedy, farce, melodrame ; she did the best she could with them, and had even begun to attract the approbation of the regular *habitués* of the theatre, who marked her as a painstaking, promising young actress. Her companions took little notice of her ; she was not popular ; for the women could not disguise the fact that she was strikingly handsome, and they could find no handle against her character, so that their malicious feelings were in a state of very painful suppression. Bianca was not nearly so comfortable as in the circus. True, old Simpson was violent in his temper, and very hard and mean in all his money matters ; but then he took a cordial interest in every individual of his troop ; he rejoiced when they got any applause, and felt so much real sympathy with all they did, that it was quite a comfort to act under his eye. He took a real pride in their success, and, except where money was in

question, he showed much consideration and kind-heartedness for them. He was a real artist in his line, and no attempt at excellence was unappreciated by him. In the theatre, on the contrary, all was dull and in routine; any sort of enthusiasm for the profession was unknown, and would have been laughed at, had any one shown it. None of the actors had any ambition, nor any desire for excellence; they acted with a certain business-like completeness, and were content to be thought not worse than average provincial actors. The manager seldom was seen; he never addressed a word of encouragement to any of them; he looked to getting as much out of them as he could, and the actors looked to giving as little as it was possible. Neither party considered their profession as an art to be reverently cultivated,—only a means of getting a livelihood. No wonder that Bianca felt in an ungenial atmosphere!

One night she acted the part of a young madcap page with much grace and spirit, and gained great applause. As she was passing up to the dressing-room, she met the manager, who was staring at one of the side scenes.

"I tell you what," said he, catching hold of her hand, "you have acted devilish well to-night; you are a deucedly clever girl, and worth all the company put together. I'll see you put into better business soon."

Some one came up at that moment, and he dropped her hand suddenly, and appeared as if he were giving her some common directions.

Bianca went up stairs, wondering whether she was

dreaming, or what such a sudden insight into her merits might portend. From that day the manager contrived to be constantly in her way, as she was either leaving the theatre after rehearsal, or going home after the performance in the evening; and always addressed some flattery to her. She found herself in the enjoyment of many little privileges which, however, did not seem to be known by the rest of the company; the treasurer alone seemed in the secret, for he told her one day mysteriously, "that she had only to ask the manager for what she liked, and she would be sure to get it, she was such a favourite, though he could not show his partiality openly." This speech rather perplexed Bianca, who, without too well knowing why, had taken a great antipathy to Mr. St. Leger, which was the name in which the manager was pleased to rejoice. The young creature, who filled a place a step above Bianca in the company, and who had hitherto treated her with supercilious contempt, suddenly began to make advances to her acquaintance; but it was evidently against the grain, and much suppressed bitterness and dislike were apparent through the veil of cordiality she assumed. Many hints and half speeches reached Bianca's ears, which she could not comprehend, and she could get no reply when she requested an explanation beyond a contemptuous smile, and an "Oh, every body can see what you are about." It was like fighting with shadows; there was evidently a mystery going on, and Bianca found her position materially altered without her being able to say in what it consisted. Every body seemed to have become afraid

of vexing her, and yet there was an undefined insolence and maliciousness, which she felt, though she could not have made any tangible accusation against any one. This was worse than being overlooked as a nobody; but Bianca was too full of her own projects, and too much engrossed in her endeavours to study and improve herself, to have much attention to waste on green-room politics. She was as completely a being apart from the other actors, as if she had lived in another world; there was nothing in common between her and them, except belonging to the same company. There had been a continuance of dreadfully wet and stormy weather, and Bianca not being very warmly clad, had caught a terrible cold and influenza, which was the more provoking, as it came at a time when she was studying the best part that had yet been cast for her, in a new play which was to be brought out the following week. She had dragged herself one morning to rehearsal, and when there she fainted from exhaustion. Mr. St. Leger, who was in his own room, soon heard of what had happened, and came in a fuss of humanity to insist on her going home immediately; he made her swallow a glass of the particular Madeira which he kept in his own room, and told her not to think of coming to the theatre again till she was quite well.

Bianca was astonished at so much consideration; but as, at the present moment, she was quite unequal to going through the rehearsal, she followed his injunction and went home, very much troubled to know what she was to do for her week's salary, which she

knew she could not earn, and what would become of her if she were fined for missing the rehearsals; and, above all, anxious about her appearance the following Monday in her new part. She was so little beforehand with the world, that a week's illness would, in her present circumstances, embarrass her seriously. She had always enjoyed such robust health, that this was her first serious indisposition, and, like all people to whom illness is strange, she fancied herself worse than she even was. But whilst, depressed by gloomy forebodings, she was sitting, in the afternoon, over her small fire, a note was brought in from the treasurer, saying, that Mr. St. Leger had directed him to tell her that her attendance at the theatre, either for rehearsal or performance, was dispensed with till Monday night, when it was hoped she would have recovered her strength, and be well up in her new part; that she need not be uneasy about her illness, as her salary would be paid as usual. This note was the best medicine Bianca could have received, and she began to think Mr. St. Leger must be a much better man than she had taken him for. On Monday night she was nearly well, and quite able to act. She was surprised to find an elegant new dress prepared for her part; for though the piece had been announced with "entirely new dresses and decorations," yet she did not expect to find them descending to her own share. But no woman is ever displeased at a piece of finery; and even Bianca, with all her high aspirations, dressed herself with the satisfaction that might be fancied in a peacock find-

ing his new tail in all its glory, after a dreary moulting. She was in capital spirits, and acted extremely well; the house was full, and she had a success which reminded her of the old times at the circus. She went home highly elated, and began to fancy she had already begun to rise.

She was crossing a bridge that lay between the theatre and her lodgings, when she perceived a female leaning over, and looking intently into the river. It was the young actress we have mentioned, as cultivating her acquaintance.

"Why, Miss Douglas!" cried Bianca, "what are you doing here, at this time of night, and in this pouring rain?"

"What is that to *you*?" said the other, sharply. "Go about your own business; it is my turn to be here to-night—perhaps it will be yours before long;" and she turned away, and leaned again over the low wall.

"But, Harriet, I am *sure* there is something wrong with you; nobody who could help it would be standing here to-night. If you are in any trouble, let me help you."

"You!" cried the other, impatiently; "no; I hate the sight of you; the only comfort is, that you will be as miserable as I am before long—your triumph won't be long. Now go your ways, for I want neither you, nor any thing you can do. I hate you. That's plain enough, is it not? and you are the cause of my being here."

Bianca thought she was going out of her mind; she

again attempted to soothe her and persuade her to go home ; but she remained sullenly silent. At length she said, passionately—

“I thought the street was free, at any rate, but it seems I am to be tormented everywhere. I have no home ; I was turned out of my lodging this morning, and dismissed from the theatre on Saturday. I went to St. Leger to-night, to beg for money to buy a piece of bread—I have not eaten all day—and he refused, and ordered me to leave the place. As I was stealing off, I saw you, in your new dress, going on the scene, and I heard them applaud you. Do you wonder now that I hate you ? I came here. I did not know whether to go on the street, or fling myself in here. But now you may tell that man, when he is poisoning you with his kisses, and his flattery, that you saw the last of me. These are my last words in this world !”

She made a sudden spring, and would have plunged over, had not Bianca caught hold of her, and held her firmly.

“You will come home with me, to-night, Harriet,” said she, quietly, but resolutely, “and to-morrow we will consider what is to be done ; but, come along with me now.”

The excitement which had nerved the poor girl gave way, and she burst into a fit of tears. Bianca did not loose her hold till they were at the door of her lodgings.

“My mother will be asleep, so we must not awaken

her," said she, as they went up stairs. There was a small but bright fire shining in the grate, and a table with a loaf of bread, a jug of milk, and some oatmeal stood before it.

"Oh, how comfortable you are," cried Harriet, shivering with wet and cold.

"It is better than being out of doors," replied Bianca. "But now take off your wet things, and wrap yourself in this old cloak, whilst I make the milk hot. There, come close to the fire, and try to get a little warm."

Bianca busied herself over the supper, whilst her companion crouched over the blaze, and looked with curious gaze round the room.

"It is like a palace," said she, enviously. "How do you make it so comfortable?"

"There is nothing in it," said Bianca, cheerfully. "But now eat this before you talk any more," at the same time handing by far the larger share of the steaming milk porridge. They both eat their portion heartily.

Miss Douglas, indeed, had tasted nothing but a glass of gin that day.

When they had finished, Bianca said, "Now, Harriet, tell me the meaning of all you were saying on the bridge. How have I injured you?"

"I do not hate you now," replied Harriet, "but you had better have left me where you found me. I am comfortable now, but I shall be as badly off as

ever to-morrow, and all would have been over by this time. My curse on that villain, for he is one!"

"Come, come," said Bianca, "we are not in the last act yet—something will turn up for you."

"It does not matter much," replied the other, gloomily, "he has ruined me, body and soul; but if I live, I will be revenged on him. It's no good telling you a long story, which has nothing new in it; take care of yourself, Bianca, for he has his eye on you, and he is a heartless scoundrel, with no more feeling or honour, than that shoe. All his kindness to you is a mere pretence; don't let yourself be taken in by it; he is a villain, and the worst of villains, and I wish I had died before I had seen him."

Bianca tried to soothe her, but she shook her head, and said, "It is no good your trying to put me in spirits, I try to stand it out to myself; but sitting here beside you, I feel, and know I am degraded; I have no pleasure in thinking of myself," and she again began to weep bitterly.

She was a very handsome girl, with large blue eyes, which had a bold enticing look, and a fine lazy-looking figure. Her fair hair fell dishevelled over her face and neck; altogether, there was a desolate *abandon* about her, as she leaned over the fire, which contrasted singularly with the severe *retenu* and composure of Bianca's appearance. "Come," said she, "let us come to bed now, and to-morrow, I think, I have a scheme that will answer; but we must be careful not to disturb my mother. You must be content with part of

a bed for to-night, to-morrow we will make some arrangement."

The next morning Bianca was, as usual, up betimes, and had the room in order before either her guest or her mother awoke. After breakfast she said, "Now I will tell you my plan. I think my old circus manager, Simpson, would engage you—he is in town. I will go with you before rehearsal, and there is an attic in this house you might have very cheap, and you might come and sit here by our fire whenever you like."

"Well, I don't know but that might suit me very well; but do you really mean that I may come and sit in your clean bright room? Well, you *are* a good soul, and deserve all the luck you will get."

They found Mr. Simpson in all his glory, meditating on a "Roman Triumph," which he intended to bring out in a style of surpassing splendour. He was very glad to see Bianca, and listened very graciously to her proposal about her companion.

"I would rather have had *you* back," said he; "but it will sound well in the bills to say, 'From the Theatre Royal, at great expense,' though I shall only give her ten shillings a-week all the same."

This business settled, Bianca had to hurry to rehearsal. She was in a state of pleasant excitement at her success, and felt no sort of misgiving about herself, or any thing else under the sun.

After rehearsal was over, a message was brought that Mr. St. Leger desired to see her in his private room. A significant laugh went round amongst those who

were within hearing. Bianca took no notice, but obeyed the message, and found herself face to face with the manager, who was sitting at a table, on which stood a decanter of wine and some glasses. He had dressed himself with elaborate care; his hair was curled and perfumed, a large diamond-stud glittered in his glossy, black satin stock; he had altogether a flashy supercilious *routé* look, as of a man accustomed to look on all women only as so many speculations for a *bonne fortune*, and to decide on their claims to personal charms as he would have done on the points of a horse.

Bianca felt excessively annoyed at the impertinent scrutiny of his half-closed eye as she entered; but she stood silent till he spoke and expressed a hope that she was quite recovered.

"You look pale still," continued he, "and your complexion is not so brilliantly transparent as it was; but a little rest will bring all round. I cannot afford you to lose any of your charms. I shall not let you exert yourself till you are quite right again."

This might be all very friendly, but Bianca did not feel it to be so; her face crimsoned at his impertinence, and she haughtily replied:

"I was told you wished to speak to me on business."

"So I do; so I do; but sit down, sit down," and he drew a chair into line a few paces from his own.

Bianca moved it so as to face him, and sat down opposite. He poured out a glass of wine, and handed it to her.

"I never take wine, thank you," said she; "and

shall be glad to hear why you sent for me, as I wish to go home."

Mr. Montague St. Leger was rather disconcerted at this straightforward manner of keeping to a point. He began to flatter her on her capabilities as an actress, and to expatiate on his good-will towards her, and his desire to push her on in the profession, and to hint that he had great things in view for her; but all the while there seemed something behind which he was wishing to say; he had endeavoured to edge his chair nearer to her, but she had removed in the same proportion, and seemed to wait so impassively till he should declare the purpose for which he had summoned her, that he was constrained, contrary to all his tactics, to be explicit. He offered her the business of the principal actress in the company, who was about to retire, and a salary of three pounds a week; but coupled with conditions, insinuated, rather than distinctly expressed, which roused Bianca to a pitch of indignation that deprived her of all powers of speech. She rose, and, with a look of scorn and loathing, the most intense, flashing from her face, darted from the room, leaving Mr. Montague St. Leger singularly mortified and crest-fallen at the issue of his King Ahasuerus-like designs; but the sorest point was the unmistakeable expression of Bianca's look. He had been accustomed to consider himself irresistible, and Bianca's look of detestation galled him to the quick. He swore to be revenged.

"Confound the jade," said he to his confidant, the treasurer, who entered shortly after; "her virtue shall

cost her something. She shall find what it is to insult *me*. I trust to you to make her know herself; torment her life out, do any thing—short of actually driving her from the theatre.”

“You may trust it to me,” replied the other. “I have a few scores of my own to settle with her ladyship.”

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER that occurrence, Bianca found her position become almost intolerable.

That same evening, when she went to performance, she found some strange rumour had got afloat concerning her. Every one looked strange at her ; the women whispered together, and refused to speak to her ; the men made insolent jests within her hearing, evidently intended to apply to her. She was treated like one lying under an interdict.

The malice of her companions was not confined to behind the scenes. In the stage business, every little act of malice that could tend to baffle her play, and throw her into confusion, was pitilessly committed ; nothing was omitted that could make her appear to disadvantage. The most malicious reports were circulated about her, with an industry which, considering her humble position in the company, was rather surprising. No one, except the lame old prompter, ever said a kind word to her, but all professed to believe her an abandoned character.

Bianca armed herself with a proud patience. She did not need to be told who was the enemy who had done all this. She made no complaint or remark, but gave up going into the green-room, and stood at the sides to await her turn of going on.

One evening, as she stood shivering in the cold draught that swept from all sides, in a low thin dress, waiting for the beginning of a scene with her stage "lover," the old prompter passed. He stopped a moment, looking compassionately at her, and said in a low, hurried voice: "Keep up a good spirit of your own, and don't let yourself be worried into doing wrong, and you will have the best of it yet. Go on as you have begun, and you will rise over their heads before long; the folks here are malicious, but they are not fools, and not one of them believes all that is said of you; only you have vexed somebody, and they think to please him by tormenting you."

People must be drowning before they know the value of a straw, and none who have not been in Bianca's position, can know the strength and comfort she found in those few words. To discover that she did not stand alone in this systematic, petty persecution, but that one person, at least, felt sympathy with her, gave her all the courage she needed, and she felt herself able to endure cheerfully, as well as proudly.

But something of more practical importance was in store for her. On the Saturday following her interview with the manager, when she went to draw her salary, she was told, to her great dismay, that she was

*fin*ed for her *unexplained* absences the previous week! In vain she pleaded the note she had received; the treasurer declared that no partiality could be shown, that he had written without sufficient authority, and that she might appeal to the manager if she chose; but, in the meanwhile, must submit to the forfeit she had incurred.

Bianca retired in silence; she would not give the curious and malignant bystanders the satisfaction of seeing her complain; but she was none the less in despair as to how she was to wear through the ensuing week. Her heart turned sick at the horrible consciousness thus forced upon her, that if, from any accident, she were to be unable to wrestle with the iron necessities of each never-failing day as it arose, she and her mother must be crushed under their heavy, steady, unslackening steps. She stood with nothing but her own hands between herself and starvation, and they seemed very feeble to ward it off. A feeling of fright and despair, such as she had never known, seized on her. But her soul was too indomitable for such a mood to last long; she felt, instinctively, that she had no choice but to go on, looking neither to the right road, nor the left; and she had an innate conviction, that in one way or other, she should not be mastered by her difficulties. She had no idea that there was any thing heroic in this calm bravery; it seemed to her the simplest necessity laid upon her—she could not have told how or why—but a necessity from which there was no appeal, to do the thing that seemed right, and trust courageously for the conse-

quences. She had a childlike indifference to the future. It never occurred to her that it was "prudent," or "well," or "expedient," to do a questionable action to-day, because it might prove to be convenient to-morrow. She had no idea of *secondary* motives, and therefore never got bewildered in the haze and mist that streams up from the small details of every day as it arises and passes away. She was eminently *single-minded* in all her ways, without the least consciousness that there was any thing excellent in it. There is a species of stupidity in real greatness which can neither see nor comprehend the subtleties and prudent foresight of worldly cleverness.

Something good generally arises for us at a time we most need it, and least expect it, and to Bianca it came in the guise of a letter from Conrad. This would have sufficed to carry her through much heavier troubles than those she was fighting with.

It was before the days of the penny-post had dawned—but Conrad had been thoughtful enough to pay the postage. It was only a few lines of inquiry and encouragement, and telling her, that he had met her friend the actor, the previous evening, who was speaking of a very promising young actress he had met with at the —— theatre; and, on inquiry, it had proved to be his protégée, Bianca. Conrad expressed great satisfaction at hearing such a good account of her, and desired her to apply to him in any difficulty or need.

The letter was kindly and delicately worded, and Bianca was in a maze of happiness and tremulous emotion. She went to the theatre that night fenced round

with a deep sense of joy that no stranger could mar; she acted with the precious letter lying like a talisman on her heart—she looked almost superhumanly lovely. Her complexion suffused with a radiant glow that made rouge needless, and her lustrous eyes seemed to shine through a soft atmosphere of joy. It is certain that nothing makes a woman look so beautiful as the internal consciousness that her love matters are going on happily; and, on the other hand, nothing brings worn, haggard looks so quickly as an annoyance from the one she loves.

Mr. Montague St. Leger passed Bianca as she was waiting to go on—he was quite startled at her looks. It was no longer with him a lazy inclination to obtain possession of her, but a fierce cruel determination to let nothing stop him. “It must be ambition and hunger to bring her to terms,” said he to himself; “she has no friends, as far as I can learn—she will never hold out long.” Bianca caught sight of him, and shuddered with disgust, as if a toad had touched her. It seemed to her to be sacrilege against Conrad even to have met his looks.

It never crossed her mind to tell Conrad her trials and difficulties, but she addressed herself to him as to her guardian angel—the one who had been sent to stand beside her in her deepest need. “If I ever achieve any thing in my profession,” she wrote, “it will be my faith in you that has strengthened me, and the desire not to be unworthy of your goodness, that will have kept me from all evil. Wicked things are said and done in the world, and we must endure them as we

can—but believe always that I would sooner die than become any thing I should not, be or do any thing unbecoming one whom you have befriended.”

After she had written and sent her letter, she felt tranquil. The only point in which the malicious reports afloat about her in the green-room affected her was, the fear lest through some of the “stars” who were constantly coming down, they should reach the ears of either Conrad, or her friend the actor; and now it seemed to her she had provided against that; she had *told* him that she would not prove unworthy, and she felt as if he *must* believe her. For would not *she* have believed his word, even though an angel from Heaven had testified to the contrary !

Time passed on, and the season of the — theatre came to a close ; the company were, however, to remove to a neighbouring town, until the period for re-opening their own theatre returned.

Bianca’s mother had been gradually failing, though nothing beyond great debility and increased helplessness seemed to ail her, and Bianca hoped that the change of air would do her good. As soon as they reached the town, her first care was to find an airy lodging somewhat out of the town, although it gave her a long walk to the theatre; but her mother did not derive the benefit she had hoped; she became weaker every day, and Bianca had difficulty in leaving her even for her necessary attendance at the theatre. Her mother seemed uneasy when any stranger came near her, and could not bear Bianca to leave her sight; so that although she

hired a nurse, it did little towards relieving her anxiety or her toil, for she was obliged to get up many times in the night to give her mother drink and medicine; her own rest was completely broken, and she had scarcely strength for her daily business. One morning, about a week after entering the town, Bianca ventured to request permission to absent herself from the next day's rehearsal, mentioning at the same time the state in which her mother was; she did not like doing this, but she had no alternative. She received the required permission, and an intimation that she had only her own obstinacy to thank that she did not obtain more indulgences.

At the end of the week she was *discharged* from the theatre! She had no appeal, for her engagement only ran from week to week.

Stunned and in despair she turned away, there seemed now no outlet through which she might escape. Arrived at home she flung herself on her knees, but no words came from her lips. She was conscious of only one hope, and that was that her mother might die, before things came to the worst.

That same evening after dinner, as Mr. St. Leger and his friend the treasurer were sitting over their wine, he said,

"So you gave Bianca her dismissal; how did she take it?"

"Oh, seemed very cut, I promise you, in spite of her pride. I don't know what in the name of fortune she will do now."

“ Ah ! ah ! ” replied the other, with a low chuckling laugh, “ I fancy she will be more tractable in a day or two ; but we must leave her alone, and let it work awhile. If the old woman is so bad, she will do for her, what she would not to save herself from starving ; her spirit will not help her here.”

CHAPTER XXII.

"THEE had better go to the door, there is Alice Bryant in her carriage. May be she does not want to alight this wet day."

This was said by Mr. Hodgson, the principal chemist and druggist of —, and whose speech betrayed him a Quaker.

"So thy mother is no better," said he, turning to a tall, pale young woman, and taking an empty medicine bottle from her hand. "Well, I tell thee she should live well, or else my medicine will do little good. There, give her arrowroot whenever she will take it, and the bark as before. I have no time to take thy money to day, so we will never mind it.—Good morning to thee, Alice Bryant; this is not a day for a delicate plant like thee to venture out."

The girl who had been speaking to Mr. Hodgson, sighed and looked at the rich satin mantle, lined with fur, of the new comer, and at the carriage waiting for her, and then took up the packet of arrowroot which the good-natured Quaker had given her.

"Thou wilt come and say if thy mother is worse to-night," said he, as she was leaving the shop.

"I thank you much," replied the girl, in a voice of singular sweetness.

Alice looked up, and was struck with the noble expression of her face, though it was then thin and pale, and it seemed as if care had eaten all the youthfulness of it away.

"Who is that remarkable looking girl?" asked she.

"I wish I could get any one to be interested in her," replied Mr. Hodgson, "for I believe her to be a good and deserving girl; but she is an actress out of work, and somehow all the ladies I have mentioned her to seem to think she is not good enough to be helped. I wish thee would do something for her, for her mother is dying, and she is just worn out with care and nursing, besides being hungered, as thee may see by her face."

"Poor thing!" said Alice; "I will certainly do something for her. I could do more if she were any thing else, but Mr. Bryant has a great objection to those sort of people. She is starving, you say. How came she to lose her situation in the theatre?"

"She could not nurse her mother and do play-acting both. Pleasure hardens the heart, and the theatre manager turned her away, to starve or do worse."

"What is her name, and where does she live? I will visit her myself before I go home."

"She is called 'BIANCA;' rather a curious name, but she has no other as far as I can learn; and she lives at Shaw's Fold, nearly half a mile from here."

Alice, having made her purchases, and regained her carriage, ordered it to drive to "Shaw's Fold." On the way she began to feel rather nervous at the strong step she was taking in going to see an ACTRESS; and to reassure herself, repeated, a dozen times, that Mr. Hodgson, a *Quaker*, would not have recommended her, had she not been a deserving object. But then he had also owned, that no other ladies to whom he had mentioned her had interested themselves, and this rang in her ears. She would have given the world for a precedent, to have quoted to her husband, and to herself! She would have been thankful for the presence of her sister-in-law, either to have encouraged her, or to have turned the balance effectually against her undertaking. The excessive dread of blame, which was the leading feature in her character, destroyed all unity or comfort in her own mind; it made all her actions timid and limping, and paralysed all energy and spontaneity. Once assured by an authority she deemed competent that a course was right, she could have gone to martyrdom for it; but she could do nothing without a sanction. This gave, perhaps a delicacy, and what is called a feminineness to her character, but it made her negative and useless; which, however, most men seem to regard as the peculiar type of womanly perfection.

Her reveries and misgivings were, however, interrupted by the stopping of the carriage, and the footman, who touched his hat at the window, saying, "This is Shaw's Fold, ma'am, who shall I ask for?"

"Ask for a young person called Bianca, who has a sick mother."

Shaw's Fold was a row of cottages, standing a little off the road, with strips of somewhat dilapidated gardens before them. The palings were broken, and the gates mostly off their hinges. A crowd of children came running from all directions to stare at the "grand lady;" and several untidy looking women, some with babies, and some with their arms rolled in their aprons, came to their doors to hear what was wanted.

Alice did not at all like the sensation she was making, and was half tempted to give up her errand and return home, when the footman returned with intelligence, that the young woman did not live anywhere there; but that a young woman, who worked in the theatre, and had a sick mother, lived at the "Little Fold," the first lane past the turnpike. Thither Alice ordered them to proceed. The road down the lane was very bad; evidently used only by carts, which had left deep ruts in the stiff clay, which threatened an overturn every moment to the carriage. However, no such catastrophe occurred; and it stopped in safety before a small whitewashed cottage, where Bianca actually lived.

A fat, coarse, but good-natured-looking woman, was standing within, over a washing tub, her hair in loose strings falling from under a cap, and her red shining elbows splashed with soap-suds; the place was filled with the steam, and Alice nearly fell over a large black pan, which had just been lifted off the fire. She ceased her work and dropped a curtsy as Alice entered.

"Indeed, ma'am," said she, in reply to her inquiry, "I am main glad any lady is good enough to come to see after the poor creature; she is just the quietest, most industrious, pleasant-spoken lass I would wish to see; she tends that old lady night and day, and fairly pines herself with hunger to get things for her. I am sure I am pitiful to see her. I'll go first to show you the way. Here be a good lady come to see you," said she, pushing open the door of a small room at the head of the steep, creaking stairs; "take care, ma'am, that is just an awkward spot."

Alice entered the room and saw Bianca on her knees, trying to support her mother, who was suffering from a distressing cough and difficulty of breathing.

"Here," said the woman, kindly, "let me help you, my arms are stronger than yours," and she lifted the sick woman and placed the pillow to prop her up. "Ah, well a-day, the poor old lady sinks fast; I fear you won't have her long," continued she, in a condoling tone. Women of that class are like children; they love to say any thing to make an impression.

Bianca looked still more pale and emaciated than when Alice had seen her in the shop; her eyes were flat and haggard, and sunk in her head, and all her features sharp and pinched. Alice was little in the habit of paying these sort of visits, and felt some confusion in accounting for her presence.

"Mr. Hodgson told me your mother was ill, and I came to ask if she needed any thing," said she.

"You are very good," said Bianca. "I need nothing

myself, but if I had only some wine for my mother—Mr. Hodgson says she must live well, and I have not the means to get every thing.”

It was the same deep, soft voice, which had before struck Alice.

“ You shall have it,” replied she, “ and any thing else you require.”

Alice had the heart of a true gentlewoman; her manner to Bianca was precisely that in which she would have addressed the grandest lady of her acquaintance; she did not feel that conferring a benefit gave her a right to be either patronising, or to ask impertinent questions.

“ I will come again and see you to-morrow, if you will allow me,” said she.

“ God sent you to me at my worst need,” replied Bianca, whose heart bounded at the refined and gentle tone of kindness of her unknown sister. We are unable to say whether it was the force *du sang* which influenced them, but certainly those two women felt drawn to each other more strongly than actual circumstances could explain. Alice did not remain longer; but when she reached the kitchen, she inquired of the woman what she thought her lodgers most needed.

“ Well then, ma’am, if you ask me I must say that it is just every thing ; for the poor things are fairly lost; they have pawned every thing, and when the lass goes out, I have to lend her my bonnet and shawl, for it is weeks since she had her own. She does a little sewing when she can get it, but it is earning a dead penny.”

Alice gave a trifle to the woman, recommended

her lodgers to her kindness, and drove home full of benevolent schemes. She had got something to interest her and occupy her, and, in spite of her sympathy, felt in better spirits than she had done for weeks; for the time being she was delivered from the black cloud of ennui which had weighed upon her like a fog. Arrived at home, she looked out from her store-room a lavish supply of those things she deemed most acceptable, and with the assistance of the housekeeper, packed a large basket with nourishing delicacies and more substantial food—wine was not forgotten. From her own wardrobe Alice supplied a warm cloak, and every thing she could imagine needful in the way of clothing; she took a childish delight in making her present as complete as possible; she had not experienced so much pleasure for a long time, and was quite impatient till the servants' dinner was over, that she might despatch the footman on horseback with the important basket. Alice was very rich and very charitable; she gave a great deal away to the poor, but was too fastidious to have any taste for beggars and common-place poor people; all her sympathies, however, were excited for the poetical-looking Bianca, and for her deep need borne with so much austere dignity—*c'était faire au même tems le bien publique et privé*. That which made for Alice a morning's distraction and an agreeable excitement, was to Bianca life from the dead.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE acquaintance, thus begun, did not cease; not a day passed, in which Alice did not either visit her *protégée*, or send an ample supply of all she could imagine useful or acceptable. In her conversations with Bianca she became conscious that she found a sympathy with all that was lying hidden in her own heart; an echo, as it were, of her own early dreams and aspirations, but which had been *froissé* and trodden down under the common-place wisdom and heavy trivialities with which, from her cradle, she had been surrounded. There was a calm, clear judgment in Bianca, a broad, practical way of viewing things and stripping them of the atmosphere which distorted them; and Alice, with the gentle docility of heart which made her so interesting, began to cling to the young actress, and lean upon her with that keen appreciation of what was good and strong, which a consciousness of her own vacillation and timidity made instinctive in her nature. The frank humility with which she recognised it, made her inexpressibly touching and graceful.

Bianca was precisely the friend Alice needed, and Bianca was fascinated by the feminine grace and gentleness which her own mode of life had completely prevented her either seeing or cultivating.

The pleasure Alice felt in this intercourse, gave her courage to bear the sarcastic amazement of her sister-in-law, at her enthusiasm for a strolling actress. Alice had written to her husband an account of Bianca and her mother, but in the calm, guarded manner which was necessary to meet his taste; and when he gave her his sanction, "to see that the poor things wanted nothing," he was far from suspecting the degree of intercourse springing up between his wife and the poor actress. Mrs. Lauriston wrote him a sensible letter, to warn him of the mischief; but as he happened to dislike the tone of it, he contented himself with desiring Alice, in his next letter, to recollect she was in a conspicuous position, and to be careful not to be imposed on by unworthy objects, as any ridicule she incurred would fall on him. Alice, with the keen sensitiveness of a sister-in-law, directly suspected what had happened, and was only the more determined to justify herself in taking her own way.

Bianca's mother grew every day worse, and weaker. She hardly seemed conscious of her daughter's presence, and sank gradually and gently from the life-in-death, which had so long been her lot, into the entire unbroken insensibility of DEATH.

Her departure was not perceptible. Bianca, who stood beside her bed, administering some nourishment,

did not perceive when she drew her last breath; she was startled by one strange flash of intelligence in her eyes, and then it seemed as if she fell off to sleep.

Bianca fell beside the bed. The mistress of the house fortunately entered, and she was removed to the other room, but she remained many hours in a most distressing state; all her strength had been overstretched, and all her nerves were unstrung. Calm, self-governed, as she generally was, she had lost all control of herself, and a violent nervous crisis was the result. A messenger, who had been despatched to Alice, now returned, accompanied by her, and every thing that kindness could suggest was done. Alice stood over her like a pitying angel, and did not leave her the whole day; but it was not a sorrow any sympathy could mitigate. The death of her mother broke the only tie that bound her to the world—she no longer belonged to any one. In the intervals of that terrible day, when she was able to think calmly for a moment, a horrible fright seized on her soul as she felt herself standing utterly detached both from the world on which she stood, and the unknown world whence she came forth. To her disordered fancy it seemed as if a breath of wind would carry her away from the face of the earth, and whirl her she knew not whither. A sense of the vast loneliness in which she stood, terrified her. She felt like a child whom its companions leave alone in a strange place; and she filled the air with screams.

Alice, in great distress, sent for her own medical

man, who by large doses of laudanum succeeded in stupifying her, but gave orders that she should not be left alone for an instant; and Alice sent one of her servants to sit up with her, and also gave orders for the funeral.

For several days Bianca remained in alternations of stupor and violent excitement. She was not allowed to go into the room where her mother lay; but on the morning of the funeral, her ear caught the sound made in removing the coffin. She sprang out of bed, and, flinging herself on her knees, began to recite the prayers for the dead; then, rising reverently, kissed the coffin, and was removed in a state of insensibility to her bed. She had no more violent convulsions, but it was many days before she was able to leave her room.

Alice was an angel of kindness during Bianca's illness, and as soon as she was able to move, brought her to her own house for change of scene; which was a piece of real heroism, all things considered.

"You shall stay here with me, dear Bianca," said Alice, "and feel quite at home till we find some plan for you. These two rooms are your own; they open out of each other, and I have amused myself by trying to make them comfortable for you."

Bianca felt very grateful; but the feeling that it was all voluntary kindness, and that she had no hold on the love of any human being, made the sense of her loneliness feel heavy on her heart. Her eye was caught by a portrait over the mantel-piece.

"Tell me who is that?" she said, eagerly.

"That is an old portrait of my father when he was a very young man," replied Alice; "it is very badly painted, though it was done in Italy, where he resided some time."

"How very strange!" said Bianca, going up to look at it more closely, "what was your father's name?"

"Helmsby—Phillip Helmsby," replied Alice, rather surprised.

Bianca recognised its likeness to a small miniature her mother had always worn in her bosom, and which she knew was the portrait of her father; at this moment of utter desolation she was not alone in the world; her first impulse was to fling her arms round the neck of Alice and call her "sister," but the door opened and the footman announced that "Mrs. Burrel was in her carriage at the door, and requested to speak to Mrs. Bryant for an instant, as she had no time to alight."

Alice flew down stairs without noticing Bianca's agitation. Whilst she was away, Bianca took time to reflect. She felt instinctively that Alice, with all her amiability, all the kindness she had shown her, would be embarrassed if she knew their relationship. Bianca knew the timid conscientious character of Alice, and she knew that she would struggle to be all she ought, whilst the *gêne* of finding a relation in such a questionable social position would destroy all the comfort of their relationship; she had pity on her sister's weakness, and though her whole soul was overflowing with love and tenderness, she resolutely determined to quell the mighty

"hunger of her heart" for natural affection, and to keep the secret to herself for the present at least.

She stood gazing at the portrait, her heart filled with ineffable yearning; the tears streamed down her thin cheeks as she thought of the desolate abandonment to which she had been consigned, one phase of her existence blotted out before she had seen the day.

Both men and women embark in love or friendship, as if it were all pleasure—an agreeable exercise of the emotions. They use eloquent and passionate persuasion to obtain the influence and affection they desire, but hardly one has an idea of the solemn covenant they take upon themselves. When their vanity and self are gratified by success, they grow weary, and the love they have gained becomes a charge to them. A real affection is a heavy responsibility to accept; it is a solemn trust, and one that neither man nor woman can lightly undertake. That one who dares to say to another, "Give me thy *heart*," ought to prepare himself, not by yielding headlong to passionate emotions, but by self-government and self-devotion, by stability and constancy of heart, to become strong enough to bear the weight of another existence attached to his own, and to take without shrinking all the consequences of his engagement: either man or woman who embarks in "an enterprise of passion," without counting the cost, may escape human judgment, which does not legislate for such things, but they commit the most grievous sin of which the soul of man is capable. The most precious

things are desecrated and degraded to pleasures, with a cowardly sensualism that enervates the heart. Till men can recognise the *responsibilities* of the affection they accept, there will be no honour, nor strength, nor stability in them. Love and friendship are not *amusements*, they are solemn covenants; and woe to those who seek to extract the pleasure whilst they ignore the duties.

Bianca was still gazing on the face of her father's portrait when Alice returned. "What has happened, dear Bianca, that has so moved you?" she asked.

"I was thinking how very happy you are to have known a father; it must be like an incarnation of the love of God, revealed to yourself with a sweet individuality in which none other can partake."

"But do not you remember your father?" said Alice.

"No, no," said Bianca, bitterly; "I know not whether he was ever aware of my existence. I am an illegitimate child; he had forsaken my mother before I was born. She had never loved but him, and became the wreck you knew her—all her passion was thrown back upon her soul, and her whole life was laid waste by the overflowing flood. I am thrown solitary on the world, below the mark of shame, to be saved or lost, as it may chance. Oh, you are very happy to have known a father!"

Alice was rather scandalised at this frank avowal, and only hoped it would never be known either to her husband or her sister-in-law, as it would make it still more difficult for her to justify the choice of a protégée.

Mrs. Lauriston being a perfect dragon of virtue, she would not, had it depended on her, have allowed the bearers of a *bar-sinister* to come within the pale of Christian salvation;—they seemed in her eyes a species of monster which ought hardly to be admitted into the world, and certainly never allowed to rise higher than scullions or servants of all work to those legitimately born !

In less than a week Bianca had reason to rejoice in her resolution. One evening a letter was brought, that had been forwarded from her old lodgings; it was from Mr. Montague St. Leger himself, and written in a most elaborately respectful style, stating that a great actor from London was to appear the following evening, and that his principal actress was suddenly taken ill, and that unless Bianca would consent to supply her place at this short warning, he must close his theatre and forfeit his expensive engagement with Mr. ——. “Will you,” he said, in conclusion, “be at rehearsal to-morrow morning at eleven o’clock, and can you be up in the part of Mrs. Haller by night? In case you have entered into no other arrangements, I shall be glad to offer you an engagement for the next month, to take the leading female parts, at a salary of two pounds a-week; the first week to be paid in advance, and to begin from to-day.”

Like the sound of a trumpet to a war-horse, was this letter to Bianca; all trace of the languor of indisposition vanished instantly. She started up to find Alice, who just then entered the room.

"What good news have you heard, that you look so radiant?" she asked.

"Read there," replied Bianca; "and yet, though it is good in one sense, it has a strong alloy, you see. I must leave you suddenly."

"Oh, Bianca!" cried Alice, "surely, surely you will not return to that dreadful way of life! I was in hopes you had forsaken it for ever. I had all sorts of plans for you. I wrote to a friend of mine, telling her about you; and here is a letter I have just received, offering to take you as her nursery governess, at twenty pounds a year, and then I could always have seen you, and you could have spent all your holidays with me!"

"Dear, kind friend!" said Bianca, taking her hand, caressingly; "you have been my guardian angel; without you I must have been either dead or mad by this time. I owe you an immensity of obligation, which I can only pay by loving you with all my heart and soul. Any *possible* desire you expressed about me, I would kill myself to perform; but you cannot change my nature, I must be what I am. The stage is to me a *passion*, as well as a profession; I can work in no other direction; I should become worthless and miserable; all my faculties would prey upon myself, and I should even be wicked and mischievous, and God knows how bad, if I were placed in any other position. You don't know what it is to be devoted to an art; it possesses one like a demon; it is a sacred necessity laid upon me, which I cannot help obeying. Do

not think me obstinate or ungrateful. Besides, what else am I fit for? The place of a nursery governess would not suit me; and even if your friend were generous enough to try me, she would not be able to persist in the questionable course of keeping an ex-actress about her young children. No, no, I must realise myself in my own way, or not at all. I am already *fêtrée* in the eyes of all the quiet, gentle, still-life people amongst whom you dwell."

"But," said Alice, impatiently, "I cannot let you go so soon—I care for you, as I never cared for any one—you do me so much good—I feel a better person since I knew you. Why need you leave me?"

"Dear Alice (let me call you so), be assured that I love you more than I dare express; none but a *sister* could feel for you, as I do. When I have raised myself in my profession, and have made myself a place in society, I will come back to you; then, perhaps, our intercourse may be renewed; but at present, there is a gulf between us; situated as you are, you cannot continue to see me, and I do not wish it. If I succeed, be assured you shall hear of my success; meanwhile, let me continue to love you, and whatever blame or questioning your kindness to me may subject you to from your own circle, be strong enough not to regret it. You have acted most generously by me, and I will never disgrace you."

"And when must you go?" said Alice, wiping her eyes, though in spite of herself, she was rather relieved

from an indescribable embarrassment, by the calm decided manner in which Bianca broke their future intercourse.

"I must be at rehearsal to-morrow by eleven, so I shall leave you directly after breakfast, that I may have time to fix myself in some sort of lodgings : I should not like to go straight to the theatre from here."

"John, the coachman, lets two rooms in his house; I know if you went there, I should hear of you constantly, and see you, too, sometimes, and you would not seem to be gone quite away from me," said Alice.

"That would suit me well, if it could be arranged," replied Bianca; "and you will come and see me act, will you not?" continued she, coaxingly. "I want you to see what I can do. This is the first chance I ever had ; luckily, I know my part for to-morrow ; but I will send you word when to come. I should like you to see me in a good part."

The next morning, Bianca engaged the two rooms in John the coachman's house, and Alice undertook to have all her things removed, and arranged, whilst she was at rehearsal. She spent the whole morning in contriving to surprise Bianca ; and when the latter returned, she found a stand of beautiful flowers in the window, pictures on the walls, books in a small book-case from Alice's own bedroom, and every corner showing traces of the labour of love, that had been so minutely at work. Alice was waiting to receive her. "I could not let you come to a solitary home," said

she. "Now come and look how you like what I have done. I shall come and see you very often, remember."

"As often as you are allowed," said Bianca, mournfully; "for you are not a free woman: but absent, or present, I shall love you equally. It is a new chapter in my life that is commencing, and you have helped me over the roughest part of my way. God will bless you for it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE morning after Bianca's departure, Alice received a letter from her husband, to say that he would be at home that same day for an early dinner, and that he would be accompanied by Mr. Conrad Percy, the son of his old friend.

Alice's first thought was, to rejoice that Bianca was safely out of the way, for she felt, in an instant, the dislike her husband would have to coming in contact with such a questionable style of acquaintance. Alice was good, kind, affectionate, and devoted in an eminent degree, but she was utterly destitute of moral courage. She had an intense horror of being *blamed*. Her husband's approaching return made her think of Bianca with fear, and she almost wished her whole acquaintance and connexion with her could be blotted out. Not that her *own* feelings were changed, but she had begun to look on the matter with his eyes. Then she began to think anxiously on what she should order for dinner; and whether her house and household would suit the fastidious taste of a Londoner. She had always

heard Bryant speak with great respect of Mr. Percy, senior, and incidentally of the style in which he lived, and the perfect order of his household. Alice fancied that Mr. Conrad Percy, his son, would be a milder emanation of the same perfections.

Conrad's father was a distinguished barrister, in great practice, with a handsome private fortune of his own; he was a hard, rigid, tyrannical man; he talked a great deal about justice and mercy, "and love to his species," but he never gave any of the "species" within his reach any peace, unless they conformed in all things to his will; he preferred giving assistance to those who needed it, in words, rather than any thing else; but his worst enemies were obliged to admit, that he always uttered very beautiful sentiments, in a very beautiful tone of voice. His wife had been many years dead, and Conrad was an only child. After leaving college, his father had him at home to live with him; to be his companion, he said, when liberated from business; but, in reality, not to let him go from under his immediate influence.

His son was his born subject, and could not give notice, like his servants, when they could stand being worried no longer. He gave him a handsome allowance, but kept him strictly dependant upon him. Conrad was studying for the bar (after a fashion), but he had no genius for hard work, and having the prospect of an ample fortune, there was not the spur of necessity upon him, which seems the only condition under which men can achieve any study in this world. He had

become a refined, dreamy, imaginative young man ; his health was not strong, so that he did not feel his situation so irksome as it would have been to many others ; he had a passionate desire to travel, which, however, his father would by no means indulge. It was a severe attack of illness, threatening consumption, that induced his father to consent to his going into the country along with his friend Bryant. The physicians had recommended Naples, but he would hear of nothing out of England.

There is something absolutely intoxicating in the sight of the country, to one who has been confined to a sick room in a town ; there is no pleasure in existence equal to it ; it is worth being ill to enjoy it. Conrad felt the freedom of getting completely away from his father's control, and gave himself up to a dreamy luxurious stillness of enjoyment. There was a mysterious beauty in the thick leafy trees, the rich green of the leaves and meadows, the soft freshness of the air, and the little gleams of scenery standing here and there, like pictures, out of the wide landscape. Nothing like passionate emotion had ever been aroused in his nature ; but it was slumbering, nigh to wakening, in dreams, vague aspirations, and sentiments without shape or object. He was in the calm that precedes the breaking up of the elements. Bryant talked little ; he was thinking of his business, and their journey was performed almost in silence. They arrived about four o'clock ; Alice was at the door to welcome them almost before the footman had opened it. She was

too glad to see her husband, to have much thought for Conrad, though she certainly felt relieved, when she saw an elegant gentle-looking young man, who, in spite of an air of fashion, did not seem as if he would be very critical on her house-keeping, or perceive how inferior she was to her sister-in-law.

Dinner was ready when they arrived, and after a hasty toilet the travellers sat down. There was much for Alice to hear and tell, and she was glad of the presence of another to shelter her whilst she told the history of her protégée, and where she had installed her.

"Well, my dear," said Bryant, when she had finished, "you know I never object to your amusing yourself, but another time I wish you would pick up your protégées in a less questionable line of life. I have an intense dislike to actresses, and all that sort of thing, and should not wish you to become a lady patroness of them. I don't blame you for what you have done, my love," added he, seeing Alice blush painfully. "This Miss, whatever is her name, seems an inoffensive young woman of her class, and you can take a box for her benefit and all that, but now she is gone back to her old way of life, let her gently down—that is all I mean, and now let us talk of something else. You must amuse my friend here as well as you can, for I shall be full of business for some days. You had better take a drive to my sister's and show him the place, and then perhaps she will suggest some plan for to-morrow."

At this moment the head manager of the Works was announced. Alice finished the grapes on her plate, and then rose from table. She felt hurt and discomposed; what her husband had said about Bianca had jarred upon her feelings, and his reference to his sister was enough to ruffle any woman—it was such an instinctive preference of her opinion to his wife's. He did not intend to worry her the least in the world, but men are very clumsy and obtuse in all the complicated and delicate matters of female jealousy.

Whilst she was chewing the cud of her discontent, Bryant entered, followed by Conrad.

"Here, my dear!" he cried, "I come to install Conrad under your care, for I must be off to the Works with Blick. I have brought something for you too, which I had better give you whilst I think of it."

He left the room, and shortly returned with a superb India shawl.

"There!" said he, flinging it gallantly over her shoulders, "I hope you will like it. You once said you wished for one; this was the handsomest I could find. I cannot say I think it pretty, but perhaps you will see more beauty in it than I do."

"Oh, how superb!" exclaimed Alice, "and how good of you to recollect what I said so long ago; but I wish you admired it, I should wear it with so much more pleasure then."

"Nonsense!" replied her husband, "do not be so childish; if you like it, that is quite enough; and see, when you go to my sister take her this scarf, it will not

do to kill her with envy of your Cashmere all at once. Now, good bye, Blick is waiting for me."

"You will be home to tea?" said Alice.

"No, indeed, I shall not; I shall be engaged in the counting-house till late, so do not even sit up for me—I shall be so uncertain."

Poor Alice! even the possession of a real Cashmere shawl did not comfort her for being left by her husband, and so immediately after a long absence, to plunge into business. She began to torment herself to discover a reason; first fancied that she had displeased him about Bianca—and then, that he had become indifferent to her. If she had been alone she would have indulged herself in a peaceable fit of crying; but as Conrad was there, she was obliged to postpone it till another time.

Conrad began to find the atmosphere of the house very oppressive, and to wonder what on earth he should do with himself. Alice, by way of conversation, began to express an interest in his health, and to hope it would improve in their fine air; but Conrad had no taste for settling either his own ailment or other people's, and he asked her to give him some music. Alice immediately opened the piano, and played a few slight airs with much delicacy and feeling, but without any pretension to being a fine performer.

"I wish I might invite Bianca," she exclaimed at last; "she sings so beautifully, not like any one else I ever heard."

"Bianca!" cried Conrad, who was lounging at the window; "what Bianca is that?"

"The young actress I was speaking of at dinner."

"Oh, I did not catch the name, and am ashamed to say I was not attending, but tell me about her now; if she be the person I mean, she has a mad mother whom she supports."

"She is the same," replied Alice; "and is she not charming? I am so glad to find somebody who feels an interest in her, and to whom I can talk about her. Mr. Bryant has such a prejudice against professional people; they seem so unsubstantial to men of business."

"Tell me all about her," said Conrad, seating himself beside her work-table, "and I will wind this silk for you the while."

Alice soon told him all she knew about Bianca.

"Will you take me to go and see her to-morrow?" said he.

"Why," said Alice, "you see I don't know whether Mr. Bryant would like me to go; but I will ask him." And then Alice began to wonder what any of her acquaintance would think, if they should call and find her *tête-à-tête* with a handsome young man; and the bare thought of all they might say, made her feel very uncomfortable.

"What an intensely disagreeable woman!" thought Conrad, wondering at the sudden stiffness of her manner; "but it is impossible to get on with these provincial people."

"I should like to go to see her act to-night," said he, aloud, "if it will not interfere with your hours."

"Oh, not in the least," replied Alice. "I will order

tea directly, as I shall be very glad to hear from you how she succeeds. Poor thing, what a deplorable way of life for her! Is it not? Do you not think it degrading for a woman? I wonder government will allow it!"

Conrad thought any thing would be better than the decent stagnation in which she seemed to live. He did not say so; but made his escape as soon as possible from a *tête-à-tête*, which he felt insupportable.

CHAPTER XXV.

BIANCA had often figured to herself the possibility of Conrad's coming unexpectedly into the theatre, and appearing before her, as he had done on that memorable night at the circus; in fact, she lived in the vague hope of seeing him any day; but, on this particular night, she had no fancy or presentiment of what was actually taking place; which shows, that in spite of animal magnetism, every thing befalls us when we least expect it. The play was *Romeo and Juliet*; it was a character with which she could identify herself completely; it was a fine conception, perfectly worked out, for it was not acting, it was her own heart and life she was embodying, and it was to Conrad that all the passionate burning love was dedicated. *He* was the only Romeo she saw—the actor on the stage was only the masque, the lay figure of him whom she addressed. Conrad, all the time, entirely unconscious of this, was sitting, wonder-struck with her genius and beauty. He had become madly in love with her before the end of the first act; and, by the time the curtain fell, he felt almost in

despair of ever inducing such a being to listen to him. He was intensely jealous of every man in the theatre, fancying that any one of them might be a favoured lover; in particular, he felt as if he must dash out the brains of a young officer with moustaches, in the same box with him, who was most vigorous in his applause; and who, he fancied, interchanged intelligent glances with her at some of the most tender passages. It was with the utmost difficulty he refrained from insulting him, when he heard him turn to his companion, and say, "Faith, I'd have no objection to be Romeo to that girl!"

Conrad did not dare, much as he wished, to send a message to her dressing-room, but went home like a man walking in his sleep. He could scarcely answer Alice's questions on his return; but replied, in the most absent manner, at complete cross purposes, refused all refreshment, and very soon requested permission to retire to his own room.

Alice fancied she must have offended him in some way, and began to examine all she had either said or done; but the only conclusion she could come to was, that he was a very strange young man, and that Londoners were always so conceited, and found nothing good enough for them when they came into the country.

"Well, Conrad, how were you pleased last night? What do you intend to do with yourself to-day?" asked Bryant, the next morning, at breakfast. "I hope you slept well, and found all comfortable."

Conrad coloured and started; he thought there was a hidden sarcasm in Bryant's speech, for he had not slept at all, but been walking up and down his room nearly the whole night, and he feared his steps must have been heard. Bryant was reading his letters, and did not look up. Alice was pouring out the coffee, and thinking that the new footman did not clean the silver so well as his predecessor. Conrad eat nothing, and thought Bryant would never go. At length, having ascertained that he had finished his third cup, he put his letters together, inquired at what hour dinner would be ready, and told Conrad that if he chose to ride, there was a horse at his service, unless he preferred going with Alice to call on his sister; and then kissing his wife's forehead, with the air of a man not thinking of what he was doing, he left the room. Shortly afterwards he passed by the window, where Alice had stationed herself to watch him, but he did not look up. Alice turned away with tears in her soft eyes—she felt very lonely, and as if she were of no value to any body.

Conrad sat pinching the ears of Alice's Italian greyhound, to cover his want of confidence to propose that they should go and see Bianca.

"We had better set out soon, as we have some distance to go," said Alice at length.

"Yes," said Conrad eagerly, "or we shall not find her before she goes to rehearsal."

"Whom? My sister-in-law?" said Alice. "I was speaking of her; Bianca lives close by, but I fear Mr.

Bryant would hardly like our calling. He seemed quite impatient this morning when I began to mention her."

Conrad was in despair. "You forget," said he, "that I am an old friend, and have a right to congratulate her, and perhaps she would not like to receive me if I went alone."

"I don't know what to say," began Alice.

"My dear Mrs. Bryant," interrupted Conrad, nearly twisting the dog's ear off as he spoke, which shrieked dismally and ran to his mistress—"I *must* see Bianca. It is only common courtesy in me to call. If you do not like to accompany me, tell me where she lives, and I will go alone, and you can call for me on your way to Mr. Bryant's sister." He spoke quickly, and almost angrily.

"But there is plenty of time," said Alice, somewhat surprised, "I will write her a little note if you will wait a few moments; and there is a book I want to send her, perhaps you will take it."

Conrad felt ashamed of his warmth, muttered something about the uncertainty of his stay, and whilst Alice went to her writing-table, lounged about the room, took up some of the books from a book society, read the names of the members pasted at the beginning, pulled about the ornaments on the chimney-piece, and thought she would never have done.

"Here is the London newspaper," said Alice. Conrad took it, and read it, wrong side upwards, for a few moments, and then put it down.

At last Alice finished writing her note; then she read it over, putting in all the stops and the dots that had been omitted; folded, directed, and sealed it. Conrad watched each process with a sort of patient desperation. At length, when he felt that another moment would drive him mad, she gave him the note and the book, but was again going to delay to wrap it in paper.

"Oh, pray let me have it as it is," cried poor Conrad; "I cannot bear to carry things muffled up in paper."

He had still to listen to minute directions for finding his way, and at last narrowly escaped having the footman sent to show him the house. At length he was free. Until he was fairly out of sight, he walked like one pursued; but, as he drew near to where Bianca lived, his steps slackened. His heart beat so violently he could scarcely breathe; his veins seemed filled with lead; he walked several times past the house before he could summon courage to knock; and he was only driven to it at last, by the thought that, if she had to go to rehearsal, he should lose the opportunity altogether.

Bianca was sitting in her neat room, occupied in mantua-making a dress for *Lady Macbeth*, which she had to play that same evening. A set of zinc ornaments, and a glaring diadem for the queen's costume, were on the table; a stage mantle of crimson velvet, trimmed with gold tinsel, hung on the wall beside the window. Had she known, she would have almost foregone seeing Conrad at all, sooner than have

been found by him with these environments. No one could have a keener perception than herself of the tinsel tawdry reality of all stage effects, and no one could loathe the details of her profession more than she did. It required all her imagination and enthusiasm for her art, to carry her through the coarse, gaudy, glaring, accessories. Her own appearance was in singular contrast. She was dressed in a white morning robe, which crossed over the bust, and a purple merino apron marked her round and slender waist (both were the gift of Alice); her luxuriant hair was all gathered in a large knot at the back of her head. She was standing before a glass and trying on the head-dress, when the woman of the house opened the door to say that "a gentleman was inquiring for her." She had barely time to take it off when Conrad stood before her! He began at least three sentences without finishing one; his voice died in his throat, and he literally had lost the power to speak intelligibly. Bianca, on her side, was equally discomposed; her face and neck were suffused with crimson—the veins in her neck and temples throbbed almost to bursting, the room swam before her eyes, and she grasped the back of a chair that stood near to keep herself from falling. At length, by a violent effort, she composed herself, and desired him to be seated; and busied herself in sweeping away the work which was encumbering the table into a large work-basket.

"I have brought this note, madam, from Mrs. Bryant; I would not have ventured to intrude without her sanction," said Conrad, at length, hardly knowing what

he was saying, and speaking from the very extremity of his embarrassment in the most formal manner.

Bianca felt a sharp pang of disappointment. "Oh, she sent you !" said she, haughtily.

"Yes—no—I requested—I did not know whether I might venture—" stammered Conrad, "in short, how could I dare expect that you would receive me—but you are displeased—I wished—I thought—"

"Oh! not displeased," said Bianca; "but I felt pained that—"

She hesitated, in her turn.

"Bianca!" cried Conrad, madly, "*are* you glad to see me, or have you quite forgotten me? I could not help coming to you; tell me, have I done wrong—will you not speak to me—are you angry?"

"No," said Bianca, and tears she could not control, fell from her eyes, through the long fringes that covered them.

Conrad, hardly conscious of what he did, left his chair, and knelt beside her. The same thought and feeling were in the heart of both; the barrier between them melted like ice; they themselves hardly knew the words that passed between them; but they knew that their hearts and souls were fused into one; they were both wrapped in one intense feeling of content and happiness.

How long they were together, neither knew, until they were interrupted by the arrival of Bryant's servant, who came to inquire whether Mr. Conrad Percy was

there, as his master was waiting dinner for him. Both started in dismay, when they heard his voice.

"Heavens!" cried Conrad, "I have kept Mrs. Bryant waiting all the morning to take me to pay a visit. I was to be back in half an hour. What am I to say to her?"

"And Heavens!" cried Bianca, "what is to become of me? I have missed rehearsal, and not a bit of my dress is ready for to-night!"

But instead of seeming distressed at their lapse from all propriety, they both laughed; for they felt themselves armed against any sort of evil that could befall them, either now or ever.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOR a whole month, Conrad and Bianca were undisturbed in their dream of happiness; no cloud or shadow rose between them. They saw each other every day; sometimes they walked together; sometimes he sat with her in her lodgings; till the country people, and the people of the house, and the people at the theatre, all had their own version of the phenomenon. Bryant and Alice were the only two persons in the neighbourhood who had not heard of the scandal, except the parties most nearly concerned, Conrad and Bianca themselves. But if "thrice is he armed who hath his quarrel just," seven times are those armed against scandal who have no idea they are giving rise to it. To both Bianca and Conrad, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be together every instant of time they could command; the only strange thing was to separate at all. Luckily for Bianca, she was now so indispensable at the theatre, that neither manager, treasurer, nor underlings, dared to say any thing likely to vex her. She was treated outwardly with the most profound respect.

"It is a comfort," said Mr. Montague St. Leger one day, "to see that the 'icicle of Dian's temple' has melted at last, like other mortal frost work,—and what airs the minx used to give herself!"

"Well," rejoined his companion (Bianca's old enemy, the treasurer)

" 'It soothes the awkward squad of the rejected
To find how very badly she's selected.' "

"If she had tried she could not have found a more insignificant, ordinary fellow than this young puppy."

"I wonder if he intends to marry her," said Mr. St. Leger.

"She is quite capable of trying to take him in," replied the other. "Who is he at all, do you know? it would be only right to give his friends a hint of what he is after."

"So it would," rejoined Mr. Montague, setting his stock. "Find out about him, and let us send a letter 'from an unknown friend,' to spoil my lady's ambitious game."

"Oh, I'll soon find out all about him, never fear.—Ah, my dear girl, how late you are!" said he, suddenly breaking off, and addressing Bianca who just then entered, in the most coaxing tone. "We are all waiting for you, but you are quite a sultana, and have your own way completely."

Bianca gave a contemptuous shrug, and without deigning a reply, began her business.

Two days after the above conversation, old Mr. Percy found amongst his letters one couched in most ominous language, warning him to lose no time in saving his son

from the snares of an artful woman of loose reputation, an actress, with whom he was completely infatuated, and who was seducing him into every species of vice and extravagance.

Every body professes not to pay any attention to anonymous letters, but notwithstanding they always infuse an unpleasant degree of suspicion. The old gentleman first pooked and pshawed, and declared that writers of anonymous letters ought to be ducked in a pond and horsewhipped—declared to himself that he did not believe a word of it; but in the course of the morning he found himself thinking that he would be all the better for a little country air, and that as he should have to write to Bryant, about a certain case that Bryant had put into his hands, he had much better see him: it would save writing, and be more satisfactory. The result was, that the next day the old gentleman made his appearance at Bryant's house, about an hour before dinner.

Fathers should never risk their welcome by going unexpectedly to see their children who are out on a visit. It is ten chances to one but that their dutiful offspring have fallen into some sort of pleasant mischief, and don't care to be disturbed; and this, without any imputation on their filial piety—it is merely a sense of incongruity. Things that, at the moment before, looked quite right and natural, assume a quite other aspect in the paternal atmosphere. The most innocent, respectable life in the world, takes, as every body knows, a very

questionable, shabby-virtuous air, when recorded in a court of justice;—much like the aspect of articles in a pawn-shop, which, no matter how good they may be, always lose the halo of respectability which made them shine in their original sphere.

Alice was alone when Mr. Percy arrived. He seemed to her a very nice, mild old gentleman, far more agreeable than his son, and she soon found herself talking away to him with great interest. In the midst of all manner of compliments and honeyed speeches the old gentleman had, without seeming to question her, drawn from Alice a great deal more than Alice knew she was communicating; indeed, a great deal more than Alice knew herself. But knowledge is not knowledge, except to those who can use it; it is a dead stone, unless they have the secret to strike fire from it.

“He goes out fishing, and walks a great deal,” said Alice. “He says his physicians ordered him to take a great deal of exercise. And then he discovered some old college companion in the neighbourhood, and has been there a good deal. We do not see much of him in the house. I fear he has had rather a stupid visit on the whole. The theatre seems the only amusement he cares much for.”

“Have you a good company here?” asked Mr. Percy, negligently.

“I don’t know, we so seldom go. There is one young actress, whom Conrad thinks very clever. She is a very respectable young woman, and he made us go, a

large party, to see her one night.—Are actresses ever received in society in London?" asked Alice, innocently; but she received no reply, for Bryant, at that moment, came in; and shortly afterwards, Conrad returned, punctual for once, to dinner. His heart misgave him when he found his father had arrived. All his castles in the air—all his dreams of happiness, from being bright rose-coloured clouds, became thick, dark, and portentous of nothing but storm and tempest. The instant he saw his father's face he felt instinctively that he had been making a great fool of himself, and that his father would have no sympathy or mercy on him. Nevertheless, nothing could be more a model of paternal manners to a grown-up son, than the candid *bonhomme* with which the old gentleman greeted him; though, to be sure, he did not know that at that very moment there was a letter lying for him at home, which had passed him on the road, to request his sanction to this "dear son" Conrad's marrying Bianca, and bringing her home to keep house for them,—or it would have ruffled his temper, politic as he was.

During dinner, Conrad talked a great deal, meditating all the while how he should make his escape to Bianca. He dwelt much on the old college friend whom he had discovered—whom, by the way, he had seen once for a quarter of an hour, and who had all the credit of having his company during his frequent absence and unpunctual returns. It was a great relief to him when, after Alice had withdrawn, his father began to engage

Bryant in a professional discussion of the Chancery suit; he was stealing off, when he was called back.

"What do you intend to do with yourself to-night? Bryant and I will soon have finished our business, and I want some talk with you."

"I thought of going to the theatre, sir," said Conrad, biting his lip.

"Well, I don't mind if I go with you, and perhaps our lovely hostess will honour us with her presence; but do not go out of the way, for I want you."

Conrad flew to Bianca with much the sort of feeling that a bird might return to its nest, knowing it had been marked by a mischievous school-boy. However, as his father must see Bianca some time, it was as well he should see her to the best advantage.

The old man easily contrived to learn all the particulars about Bianca from Alice. He was really charmed with her acting; and, on the whole, thought that his son might have done a more wonderful thing than fall in love with her. The next morning he brought matters to a crisis, by requesting his son to take a walk with him. They proceeded in silence for some time; at length, looking at him sideways, he said, abruptly,

"Well, what have you got to say to me?"

Conrad felt as if a pistol had been discharged in his ear, but after a minute he replied,

"I wrote you a letter, sir, yesterday."

"Ah, well, I shall find it when I get home. Tell me what was in it."

Who is there that, when a child at school, has not known what it is to go up with a carefully conned lesson barely balanced in the memory, and have it all driven away by the abrupt jerk with which the book has been taken! Poor Conrad could not say one word.

"Well?" said his father; "come, come, out with it; a bird in the air whispered to me about some little actress down here; what is it all? You have made a fool of yourself, I suppose, and want me to help you out."

Relieved by the tone in which his father spoke, and finding the ground already broken, Conrad, as briefly as he could related the whole history of his acquaintance with Bianca, from the time of his first meeting up to the present, and concluded by expressing his determination to marry her.

His father listened patiently enough; it was an interesting story, he had quite made up his own mind what to do, and so there was no need of going into a passion; and the game was in his own hands, for his son had no money.

"Well," said he, when Conrad was silent, "I do not reproach you; young men will be young men, and must all sow their wild oats. I wish my son to look on me as a friend," continued he, sentimentally; "I shall prove myself such. You have done all that can be expected; you have asked my sanction to marry this girl, which of course I shall not give, so she must be content with your honourable intentions. Hark you, Conrad, marriage is a young man's great card in life, and I am not going to let you throw your chance away.

You will be in love with a dozen women yet, and as you are not a Turk, you cannot marry them all; so don't want to be a romantic fool and mortgage your liberty for the first that comes in your way. I will forgive you any folly but a foolish marriage. I am not going to have the family disgraced. If you are so desperate, persuade her to go abroad with you, get your folly over, and come back in your senses. But I give you fair warning, that if you marry her, you shall never see my face again, nor have one farthing to keep you from starving; and you know," added he, in a sharp distinct whisper, and his small keen eyes gleaming as he spoke, "that what I say, I shall not fail to do."

Conrad knew perfectly well that his father could not forgive an offence if he would; that his smiling, oily, pleasant-looking, deadly malice, was never to be extirpated when it had once taken root; but though young men are great fools, yet they have a sort of loyalty that prevents their understanding the possibility of deliberate villany. He dropped his father's arm, and drawing himself up to his full height, he said in a tone as determined as his father's had been:

"I will *not* ask Bianca to be my mistress; it is more than I deserve if she consents to be my wife. If you turn me out of doors, I will seek some means of earning a livelihood, and will ask Bianca to wait till I can support her; and now you have my decision. I am your own son, and you know that I shall keep *my* word, as you will yours."

The young man was not nearly so cool as his father;

his face was flushed, his eyes sparkled, and he concluded with an indignant snort as he strode away. The old man looked after him, shrugged his shoulders, and, putting his hands behind him, walked quietly on. His whole desire in life was, that his son should make a noble alliance, and he was not going to be thwarted in his only wish by the head-strong Quixotism of a youth. At the end of about a quarter of an hour, he retraced his steps towards the house. The wily old man had determined on what he would do. He first ascertained that his son was *not* with Bianca, and then he despatched his own servant with the following billet :

“The father of Conrad requests Mademoiselle Bianca to give him a private interview. It is necessary that it should be quite unknown to his son, as it nearly concerns his interest.”

Poor Bianca was thrown into a state of dreadful perturbation by this portentous note; but returned a verbal answer, and in less than a quarter of an hour Conrad's redoubted father stood before her.

At first Bianca was struck with the smiling blandness of his appearance, which looked, at first sight, like the finest benevolence. To her, Conrad's father was the epitome of all that was grand and heroic.

The old man, accustomed to read faces, saw at once the sort of line he must take. His favourite maxim was, that it is the height of ability to induce people to do right things from wrong motives; but when it suited him, he was equally apt in taking advantage of their best qualities.

He took her hand in the most paternal manner, and gently seating her beside him on the sofa, began a long speech with "My dear young lady," and went on with many compliments to her superior understanding and so forth, to tell her that if his son Conrad married her, he would cut him off with a shilling and his malediction! he made a great fuss about his grey hairs; and concluded by appealing to her generosity not to take advantage of his son's rashness and inexperience, but to *refuse him*, which she would find more to her own advantage. It was a very well put together speech, and must have been very moving, for at the conclusion of it, poor Bianca was crying bitterly, whether at its eloquence or at the prospect of giving up Conrad, the reader must judge. The old gentleman also went on to say, with much delicacy and circumlocution, that though there was a prejudice in favour of legal marriage when there were estates, and titles, and noble families concerned,—the absolute necessity of it was lessened when (as in Bianca's case) there was no one but herself in question. This of course could only have been done to try her: such a paternal, excellent old gentleman could never have contemplated his son taking a mistress to keep him out of other mischief, till such time as he had a suitable marriage ready for him. Of course, it was only to see what her principles were like when he hinted that, in his son's peculiar circumstances, she might generously become his companion, and trust to his honour, disinterestedness, delicacy, and a great many more cardinal virtues; though we are bound to say that

he did hesitate a little in this last proposal, because he fancied she might get too much influence over him, and he did not feel it would be quite safe to trust his son with her at all. There were advantages and there were disadvantages, and the cautious old gentleman was fairly balanced between them. Meanwhile, poor Bianca, with her face buried in the sofa cushion, was sobbing bitterly. At last she raised her head, and said in a tolerably steady voice,

"I will not be the ruin of one who has been my saviour. I owe every thing to your son. I will not marry him against your consent, if he asks and entreats ever so much, or if I die for it."

"There is a brave young woman!" said the old man. "I thank you for your words. You promise me this? You shall have no cause to regret it, or to find me ungrateful. You are very prudent, and you shall find me your friend. I will retire now, relying on your *promise*."

"You may," replied Bianca, almost contemptuously.

After his departure Bianca endeavoured to collect her thoughts, to determine on the course she should take. Whilst she loathed the old man for the selfishness and grossness—the heartlessness with which he would have tempted her to sacrifice herself and her good fame—she still felt that he had a right to object to his son's throwing away all his prospects for the sake of an obscure country actress, without even a name or a relation. She felt keenly the distance of social position between herself and Conrad. Whilst she was bitterly

musings, Conrad entered. For some moments they neither of them spoke; at last Conrad, maddened by the sight of Bianca's tears, began in the most pathetic and earnest manner to entreat her there and then to unite her destiny with his and marry him, to prevent the possibility of his father separating them. He told her all that had passed between them in the morning, and concluded by again passionately conjuring her to marry him at once, and run the risk of all that his father could or would do.

Bianca recovered all her firmness whilst Conrad was speaking; she had loved Conrad when it seemed altogether hopeless that she would ever see him again in this world; he had not only come back, but had loved her as devotedly and passionately as even her heart could desire. To a true woman, the being loved by the object she has chosen, is the one matter of importance, all other things are secondary considerations; and Bianca having conquered what to her was as the kingdom of Heaven, was not likely to doubt that all other difficulties would be smoothed in due time; she was so happy and satisfied with being beloved, that even the impending separation could not altogether depress her. Her love was too much a part of her own soul to depend on the accidents of sight, and presence; and besides, he was with her *now*, and she felt very courageous.

"Conrad," said she, putting one arm round his neck as he knelt before her, "you must be ruled in this by me. For the present you must yield to your father's will and go abroad. You have always desired to travel.

I am not your equal. Your father has every right to object to your making such a match; a sixth-rate actress in a provincial town, a girl without friends, whom nobody knows, almost without a country. I am not fit to be your wife; every one would say the same; he has a right to refuse his consent to such a match; I am of his opinion, and I refuse *mine* also. I will not marry you. Hear me to the end," said she, as he made an impetuous movement to dash away from her, "hear me to the end, my Conrad; travel for three years, and *then* come back to me; by that time I shall have worked my way in my profession, and in the world's eye have become more your equal. Then I shall at least have proved myself worthy of you. I believe that God has given me what is called genius. I have power in me to become all I desire; I must prove it and work it out. To you my whole soul is given—you have been the guiding star of my life—you will be its crown and glory. To you I dedicate my life; I am yours whenever you claim me. Your father will then have no right to withhold his consent; but go *now*, dear Conrad, we must both *earn* our blessedness. I *am* yours; you are my god, my religion, my whole life is yours. You have been the one thought of my heart since the day I first saw you; and it is not likely I shall change, now that I possess the priceless treasure of your love."

Bianca spoke firmly and passionately, and she looked like an inspired sybil. Her eyes were full of ineffable tenderness; she was so filled with hope and conscious power, that she did not see the gulf of separation

that was beneath her feet. Conrad could perceive nothing else. He raved, and wept, and reproached; all that the most distracted and passionate love could urge, in the way of persuasion, to make her change her resolution, and marry him in despite of his father, the devil, and all hindrance, were quite in vain.

"Three years, Conrad—I ask only three years; come back and claim me then, and I will have made myself worthy of being your wife, and the world shall not say you are flinging yourself away."

"Three years, Bianca!" said Conrad, bitterly. "You know not what you are saying; in three years we shall not be what we are now. I have a presentiment of evil. Marry me NOW, and bind me to you, body and soul, for life. I will work for you, starve for you, love you to all eternity—my whole being is saturated with love for you. Bianca, do not send me away into the wilderness. I cannot answer for the chances and changes that may come upon either of us;—this is a crisis in my life. Bianca, let me stay with you—let me live or die with you. We know not how we may both change, if separated."

He knelt to her, kissed her feet, and used every passionate entreaty; but to Bianca, when she once saw that a certain course was *right*, it became a moral necessity to pursue it; she did not feel to have the option of leaving it;—as he became more desperate, she grew more calm.

"Hear me, Conrad," said she, at last; "I swear to you solemnly, that I will consider myself as your betrothed

wife, before Heaven, and nothing but your own will can dissolve my oath."

"You promise," said Conrad, "that you will never give me up, till I give you up, and that will never be till the elements fall asunder;" and then, taking a signet ring from his finger, he put it upon her hand. "Promise me, too, that you always wear this, and never use it, except to me ;—and now give me something of yours."

"I have not an ornament in the world," said Bianca, "except stage trumpery."

"Give me this, then," said he, untying a little blue handkerchief she wore round her throat—he kissed it, and put it next his heart. Whilst he was in this somewhat calmer mood, Bianca persuaded him to depart. They settled that they were to see each other once more, to take a last leave; but Conrad's father was much too wily to lose the advantage he had gained.

He saw by his son's look of despair and misery, that Bianca had kept her promise; he resolved not to risk the failure of her courage in a last interview. He pretended a sudden call home, and that very night, without well knowing how it had happened, Conrad found himself travelling with his father towards London. In three days he was on his way to Italy. Bianca remained at home, stunned, and suffering all the reaction of her firmness and courage; but still she had a secret happiness, a source of life hidden in her soul, which prevented her from being overwhelmed even with the dead desolate feeling of absence. Conrad loved her,

and she belonged to him; and so long as she possessed that consciousness, nothing could make her very miserable, and even her suffering was better than any happiness she had formerly known; then she had the consciousness of her purpose to employ all her energy; she was working now for Conrad's sake. She wrote to him constantly, and had an ever flowing stream of letters from him, so full of burning love that it is some wonder they did not set fire to the post bag.

About a fortnight after Conrad's departure, Bianca's friend the old actor came down, to play a series of his best characters, previous to taking a farewell of the stage. He was as much her friend as ever, and was wonderstruck at the progress she had made. For Bianca, his coming was about the best thing that could have happened, for it roused her energies and stimulated her intellect, and thus prevented her falling into a state of dreamy emotion.

As to Alice, she often sent Bianca kind presents of any thing she fancied would be useful, and once or twice called to see her; but she was too afraid of vexing her husband to keep up much intercourse with her, and Bianca had too much tact to embarrass her by putting herself in her sister's way.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE engagement of Bianca's friend, the actor, came to a close. He had been much pleased with her. At first he felt almost tempted to take her with him to London, and obtain an engagement for her there at once; but a little consideration induced him to change his mind. Bianca was so patient, so unconscious of the extent of her own powers, so earnest in her endeavours to learn, without any idea of showing off herself in any thing she did; in short, possessed so many sterling qualities, which enhanced the value of her genius (qualities, indeed, without which genius cannot "have its perfect work"), that he determined to leave her to mature her powers in obscurity a little while longer. "She will learn all the better," muttered he, "for not being hampered with the expectations which a promising first appearance always entails; and she will not get warped or mystified by dwelling in the heated atmosphere of her own reputation. She will take all the more permanent rank, and take it at once, when she does appear." Thus thinking, and thus say-

ing, he still determined to place her more pleasantly, and not to leave her to the tender mercies of Mr. Montague St. Leger. He was on the point of proceeding to Bath, and a few lines from him produced a reply from the manager, offering a very eligible engagement for Bianca. The letter came the last morning of his stay in —, and putting it in his pocket, he walked towards the theatre to meet Bianca, on her return from rehearsal.

“You must invite me to walk home with you, my dear young lady,” said he, as he met her; “for I want to have a long talk to you about a great many things. You can spare me an hour, can you not?”

Bianca was almost overcome by this honour, as she considered it, and could hardly find confidence to say how glad she felt.

They walked in silence till they reached the small house where Bianca lodged. It was not her poor little room, that she felt ashamed of showing him, for she would have experienced just the same awe and reverence had it been a palace. The benevolent old actor, who felt towards her as if she were a daughter of his own, was much pleased as he glanced round the room at the modesty and propriety of the arrangements; it was what he had hoped, what he had expected to find.

“Ah, ah, you are beginning your library betimes; what books have we here,” said he, going up to a set of mahogany shelves (Conrad’s present), which hung against the wall. “Shakespeare, of course,—and a

good edition; and some of our old dramatists; Hazlitt's Essays; Schlegel's Lectures. How did you get hold of those German translations from Schiller and Göthe? Your friend has a good judgment," said he, glancing on the fly leaf of a volume he had taken down, and which opened at "Conrad to Bianca." He fixed his eye upon her face, and in a second he had a clue to all that had surprised him in her conduct. He took her hand kindly, and said, "You must consider me as if I were your father; tell me, are you engaged to that young man?"

"Yes," replied Bianca, steadily.

"Come, tell me about it. You will not prosper the worse for my knowing, and you may trust my discretion," added he, smiling kindly; "tell me your history from the beginning. I feel curious to know the elements that have made you what you are."

"I will tell you any thing you wish to hear," replied Bianca; "but there is nothing to interest any one but myself, and only that, because it is to myself it has occurred."

"There, there, that will do for a nice little prologue: now begin, for the coach goes at three o'clock, and I must not miss it; so begin, like a good girl."

With a little hesitation at first, but gaining confidence as she proceeded, Bianca in a quiet, straightforward way, gave her friend the history of her life since coming to England, concealing nothing, not even her belief that she had discovered her half-sister, and her reasons for not claiming her relationship. Of

Conrad, she spoke modestly and naturally ; she was proud of belonging to him, and did not feel that there was any shame in avowing it ; it was the strong rock and safeguard of her whole life ; she had dwelt under the shadow of it, and it had kept her from all evil ; it was the only life of which she had to tell, and she felt a pleasure in speaking of it.

If all women were not brought up in such unnatural traditions of what is "feminine" and "maiden like," and "sensitively delicate," they would not feel it a bounden obligation to tell lies, and deny an honest lawful affection for a lover. But they are crushed down under so many generations of arbitrary rules for the regulation of their manners and conversation ; they are from their cradle embedded in such a composite of fictitiously-tinted virtues, and artificial qualities, that even the best and strongest amongst them are not conscious that the physiology of their minds is as warped by the traditions of feminine decorum, as that of their persons is by the stiff corsets which, until very recently, were *de rigueur* for preventing them "growing out of shape." Bianca had been left to nature and chance, and nobody had ever taught her propriety ; and that is the only apology we can make to those who consider her candour rather too strong.

"Well, you are a very good girl, and a brave girl, and I come back to all my prophecies about you.—You will be a great woman yet, whether I live to see it or not. I like you for trusting me with all the

truth, instead of shuffling, and trying to mystify me with modesty. You have given me a real respect for you, and now," continued the actor, taking a pinch of snuff out of a superb gold box, "let us settle a little what you are to do. I could take you with me to London, and get you an engagement there fast enough, and you would make noise there, but I do not think it would be a good thing for you to be embarrassed with the care of a reputation before you are come to the full perfection and maturity of your powers. You must consider your genius as a sacred deposit intrusted to you, to devote to the manifestation of your art, and not for the glorification of yourself; it is of much more importance that you should become perfected, than that all the theatres of the world should see and applaud you as a tenth muse. You are strong and patient, and can *afford* to wait. Your work is with you, and the reward before you; but the work is of infinitely more importance than the reward—let *that* follow in its own season. I look to you with a hopefulness I cannot express in words. You have a higher task before you than merely to make a reputation for yourself. You must not only take the head of your profession, but you must make that profession what it has never been made yet. There are wonderful and glorious resources in our art, and they have never been recognised nor developed; it has never risen to be considered more than an amusement. In mechanical and industrial ages, all the fine arts are apt to be looked on as merely amusing, or at best ornamental. But our art has never, in any age,

been made honourable. This actor, and the other actor, have been 'ornaments to their profession,' and all that; but none have ever loved it for its own sake, and dedicated their lives and powers to its honour, instead of to their own. The stage has had glorious actors, but the art has had no priests; all have wanted to be better than their profession, instead of reverencing it beyond all earthly things. How then should it ever become more than a toy, a vanity? I believe you have it in you to raise it from its meretricious degraded state. It needs to be purified from the sensualism that has defaced it, before it can assume its legitimate rank. This is the idea I would have you keep before your eyes—it is worth dedicating a life for—any one can work from a personal motive, but few have faith enough in an idea to give themselves for it."

"I hardly understand you," said Bianca; "I can conceive no higher motive, or more ennobling, than the desire to become worthy of one we love. I love my profession; I would grudge no labour to perfect myself in it, I would change it for no other in the world. But if there had been no one to whom, in my soul, I might dedicate my efforts, for whose approval I strained every nerve, I could not have worked. I could not work from a mere personal motive—it needed something to take me out of myself to induce me to aspire to excellence. I do not desire success for my own sake: but the motive *you* set before me, does not touch me—does not inspire me; I do not even *feel* what you mean."

The actor shook his head and sighed.

“ Well,” said he, “ we must have patience; go on from any motive you will, it will grow higher and nobler in time; your soul will need a stronger support ere long than the approbation or even the love of any human being. The time will come when you will think on my words. When you discover (as you surely will) that you yourself are of a nature infinitely higher and worthier than him on whom you are lavishing all the passionate treasures of your strong noble soul;—when you discover that the one object to whom you have dedicated yourself—in whom you desired to lose yourself—whom you have made your god upon earth—shrinks in cowardly fear from your entire and perfect devotion, and dare not accept your offering, but reels and staggers under the burden of your perfect love—is wearied and frightened at the very entireness with which you give up your whole soul to him—and you are left lying, fallen, and crushed under the ruin of your hopes;—then in your desolation will arise a conviction of a nobler and purer motive. You will cease to seek the vain stimulant of passionate emotion; you will feel a higher spirit aroused within you. Art will reveal itself to you in all its wonderful majesty, and you will be nobly consoled. You will see that *it* alone is worthy of the dedication of a life-time; you will give yourself to it in spirit and in truth; you will feel the glory of being its priestess, and interpreter of its mysteries; you will feel then that the responsibility of genius was not laid on you, that you might lavish it on an individual for the gratification of your own emotions, any

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more than that you might spend it on your own glorification, to make yourself a name upon the earth. You are consecrated to act a certain part, and must give yourself with your whole soul to the work appointed you. In vain will you make idols, and try to give yourself to them; they will break when you trust to them in your need. But alas! alas! through how much suffering will you not have to pass, before you believe this! I had hoped you would be led by an easier path; but excellence can be perfected by suffering alone."

He paused. Bianca, awed by his tone of solemn adjuration, remained silent awhile; at length she said, timidly.

"Oh, if you only knew the strength and the comfort the spirit of love gives to a woman, it is that alone which can move her. It has been my own salvation; what but that has kept me from evil? It is that alone which has led me on, which has given me any sort of worth I possess."

"It will not lead you to the *end*," replied the other; "you are trying to compress the god within you, to place it in a shrine of clay, and you will be broken up by it. But, meanwhile, go on as well as you can, I do not desire to make you suffer before your time. My words sound ominous and fearful *now*; the day will come when you will find strong consolation in them. However, I have not settled the immediate business I came for; read this letter, and tell me are you disposed to close with the offer?"

"Oh! how am I to thank you sufficiently?" said

Bianca, gratefully, "this is so exactly the thing suited to me. I feel what you say of London, and I would not desire an engagement there if I could obtain one. I care for perfecting myself in my art more than for any praise or credit. Oh! to be able to realise the idea of which *you* gave me a glimpse when I beheld you acting for the first time! to enter into that world, which as it were lies unseen around us, and bring out thence the thoughts and conceptions that are hidden there, and force them into a visible shape, a bodily expression, I would consent to dwell in darkness my whole life. Let *me* be nothing for ever, if I may only once give shape to those unutterable mysteries which at times seem as if they would cleave my very soul in sunder, with their dumb ineffectual strivings to become manifest. There are moments, when it seems as if I must become *mad*, I feel so incapable to give them shape and utterance; as if it needed that I, myself, should be broken to pieces like a jar of clay, that all which is blindly stirring within me may find way. I feel so weak, and my desires so indefinite; what I want to realise I can nowhere see or grasp, and yet it lies around me like a strong spirit, in whose presence I stand, though I see it not, and I sink down baffled, and weak, and paralysed. I can grasp nothing; I can do nothing,—that which I clutch at so blindly is 'high, and I cannot attain unto it!' At those times it seems as if there were nothing but death for me. Oh!" cried she, springing wildly from her chair, and tossing her arms, "why do you speak to me as if I could do any thing; why do you speak vain

words ! I do nothing, I can do nothing; I grind my life out, but it will not take the shapes that haunt me : weakness lies like lead upon my soul. Oh, if you knew ! if you knew !" said she, sinking on her seat once more, and covering her face, whilst the tears poured like rain through her fingers.

" Ah !" said the actor, deeply moved, " who that has striven, does *not* know these things ? It is out of struggles like these that any achievement must come, conquered and carried captive from the realms of madness and darkness. We must take our reason as well as our life in our hand, and be ready to lose both, if we would desire to attain to that which is invisible. Does the thought of Conrad give you strength at such times as these ?"

" No," replied Bianca, " I never think of him then, and I have never felt inclined to talk to him of these things;—it is in all my *human* difficulties that the thought of him strengthens me."

" Well," said the actor, rising, " love him as long as you can, and as well as you can. Love is the first strong impulse that moves the soul to aught that is good or great, by taking us out of ourselves;—but it is not the 'be all and the end all;'—however, I say to you go on; you are of the right order. Do not let yourself be wearied or discouraged; I shall be seeing you again soon, and we will speak more of these things;—it strengthens and comforts me to know you thus. Do not forget to write by to-night's post—I shall quite look forward to acting with you. Now, farewell."

He kissed her broad forehead, and she heard his footsteps descending the stairs, before she was conscious that he had departed, and then it seemed to her as if he had been cold and thankless in her acknowledgments, and she felt blank and lonely—she felt as if she had been suddenly thrown down to the earth after enjoying the converse of an angel, and for the remainder of the day all around her seemed coarse and cold. However, she did as he had desired, and closed with the offer from the Bath theatre, and arranged to join the company after the following week. She also addressed a few lines to her friend the actor, and felt happier after she had expressed the feelings with which his kindness had filled her heart.

Mr. Montague St. Leger was bitterly chagrined to find that his intended victim was not only escaping from him, but making a move upwards in the world; he would have given the world to find a pretext for preventing her departure; but her engagement was closed. He did not venture to see her; she drew the remainder of her salary, and lost sight of Mr. Montague St. Leger for ever!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BIANCA remained nearly the whole of the ensuing three years a regular member of the Bath company; when the theatre was closed she obtained engagements in other towns; her reputation gradually extended, and she became a great favourite. Her old friend had given her one or two introductions, but she made valuable friends for herself, and was received into very respectable society. These were the most important years of her life; she was laying the firm foundation of her future fame; so that when the season of her great success arrived, it was not a sudden and wonderful stroke of good luck, but the legitimate harvest of patient toil. She might possibly have become too self-reliant, too much self-concentrated, had not her efforts been consecrated to a purpose out of herself; it was not fame for *herself*, it was not success for her own sake, that she sought; it was to make herself worthy of Conrad; all her worldly aims centered in him; and this kept her free from any morbid anxiety about her own reputation. She continued what she had been in more ob-

scure circumstances, calm, steady-purposed, and single-minded. When she first entered Mr. Simpson's establishment she had only a blind instinct of *doing her best*, and this had grown into a second nature; she did not recognise it as a principle, for she had never been taught to articulate her morality in portable aphorisms, like so many moral cordials, to be administered to her virtues when they seemed drooping. "The world's foundations deep" are cast on the imperishable granite rocks; but they lie down far out of sight—it is always *very poor land* where the granite comes to the surface. People who are constantly thinking of their principles, and making an audible appeal to them in all they do, lead generally very barren lives: they seldom possess a rich organisation, or a powerful vitality.

Bianca never did *less* than her best; and that was her one rule of action. She had a strong purpose, which saturated her whole life, even to her lightest thoughts and most casual actions.

As to Conrad, the account of him is less satisfactory; for the first six months, he wrote regularly to Bianca, the most desperate and passionate epistles that ever were written since the days of Abelard and Eloïse. By imperceptible degrees they became less frequent, more reasonable, and less ardent; but Bianca loved too intensely, and was too much engrossed by her own passion, to perceive this change.

"Had he not sworn his love a thousand times?" was the thought that stilled all misgivings: besides, the

idea of blaming him never once occurred to her; whatever he said or did became right in her eyes, because it came from him. She loved him with all the passionate concentratedness of her nature. Not one human being in a thousand can bear the weight of the entire and perfect love of another. At first it is very flattering to all the finest vanities of humanity; but after a very little time the burden becomes intolerable, and there is an aggravating sense of responsibility under which the spontaneity of the weaker affection is crushed down. The consecration of an entire existence can be sustained only at the expense of an entire existence surrendered in return: if the return be in any wise less perfect and complete, the heart staggers and bends under the priceless burden; and in the end, by a mere impulse of self-preservation, the object on whom it has been bestowed casts it down, to be trodden under foot or perish by the way, so that he at least may be relieved from it.

In general, both men and women are too much inclined to consider LOVE as a mere amusement; to take it up lightly, under the impression that gratified feeling will be sufficient to carry them to the end; but it is far otherwise. Whoever accepts the gift of an entire and true affection contracts a weighty responsibility.

When Conrad left England he felt little inclination to visit great cities, or to enter much into society. For some months he travelled through the Tyrol, Switzerland, and the north of Italy, making long excursions on foot, and writing to Bianca glowing and poetical de-

scriptions of all he saw and felt. After he had been absent about six months he came to Milan, and he chanced to go to the opera the first night of his arrival. A young singer made her *début* that same evening in one of the minor parts, and he was struck by her real or fancied likeness to Bianca; she was very beautiful, and soon had crowds of adorers; Conrad could not long flatter himself that he was only taken by her resemblance to another; he fell in love with her on her own account, and succeeded in making her his mistress. He still cared for Bianca more than for any one else in the world, but she had ceased to be his sole object; he continued to write to her, but more rarely, and assumed in his letters a mysterious tone of melancholy. In order to engage her sympathy and prevent complaints of his neglect, he talked a great deal of the weight and misery of separation, and the small chance there was of their being reunited for long years; all which, to poor Bianca, who did not know the real state of matters, sounded very moving, and she exerted herself to comfort and reassure him; above all, she filled her letters with the most touching assurances of her own unchangeable affection.

After a while Conrad made the mortifying discovery that his Italian was by no means faithful to him—that she had, in fact, a noble army of martyrs to her charms, to whom from time to time she shewed much mercy. He peremptorily broke off the connexion in disgust; he contrived also just at that time to fall ill of a fever, and he had a long and tedious convalescence. His old tenderness for Bianca revived, and he wrote to her in his

old strain, entreating her never to doubt him, but to bear with his moods, and reassuring her against all his apparent coldness, past or future.

Bianca never *had* doubted him; and with this letter to refer to, no future conduct of his could cause her misgivings.

Conrad's father had determined to keep him at a distance until he was quite cured of his infatuation, and therefore turned a deaf ear to all his entreaties to be recalled to England, on the plea of illness; he suggested to his son that as he had taken a disgust to the law, and given up all idea of reading for it, he should enter the Austrian service for a few years. This suited Conrad's fancy, and a commission was obtained for him. He had a vague hope that thereby he might become independent, and obtain Bianca, without waiting for the celebrity by which she was to earn the problematical consent of his father. Had he been as firm of purpose as Bianca, this would have been quite practicable; but his affection had already ceased to be perfect and entire. Then, too, he fell into all the irregularities and dissipations that beset unoccupied young men with a handsome allowance. In proportion as he became more worldly and *blasé*, his ideas about women became coarser and more rigid; and after the fashion of that style of men, he expected them to do all the virtue going in the world, in spite of their own individual efforts to thwart it in all the women they came near. His experience of continental theatres and their *coulisses* gave

him a great disgust to every thing connected with the stage. He did not actually break off his engagement with Bianca, but he allowed it gradually to fall into abeyance. He expected that, in the course of nature, Bianca would receive other offers, and that, tired of waiting for an uncertainty, weaned by time and absence from her attachment to him, she would dispose of herself, and save a formal rupture; he even wrote to give her a delicate hint, that, much as it might cost him to renounce his right to her love, still his own prospects were so precarious, his father so obdurate, &c., &c., &c. that, although he loved her more than ever, still, if she could find any one who would make her happy, he would stifle all selfish feelings, and love her as a brother; and concluded his letter by a touching picture of the solitary life of exile he was leading for her sake.

Bianca did not at all understand this kind of generosity; the very idea that it was possible for any power on earth to dissolve her connexion with Conrad, was too terrible to think upon. She wept bitterly; the picture of his loneliness and exile touched her kind heart to the quick, and prevented any suspicion of his estrangement. She set all down to his generous delicacy, in not wishing to bind her to an indefinite engagement, and returned a passionate refusal to accept her liberation; at which he shrugged his shoulders, as he read it over a cigar.

Thus was the state of affairs, when one day Bianca was surprised by a visit from her old friend the actor,

who, journeying southward, had made a *détour* of some distance, to see how his *protégée* went on.

"I am come to Bath for no other earthly reason but to see you act to-night! Do not I love you very much?—and could any lover of five-and-twenty do more?" cried he, gaily, as he entered.

"You do not take me at all by surprise," cried she, springing up to meet him. "Nothing you could do in the way of kindness would astonish me."

"Well, and how do they treat you here, eh?" said he, seating himself; "and do you feel strong enough to take a first-class rank in London? but I shall see that to-night, so there is no need to ask you now. How does Conrad go on?"

"His father continues as much opposed as ever; all my hopes depend on my success in obtaining an engagement at one of the great theatres in London—he has not been in England since I saw you."

Her old friend looked at her steadily for a moment, then took a pinch of snuff. "You have been a good girl, and a patient one, and you will have your reward. You have lost nothing; you have played for the great game, and that does not bring a quick return, but a lasting one."

"I can still wait," replied Bianca, "a little longer now will be nothing—one can always *go on*; it is the beginning that needs resolution."

"Well, well, I shall see to-night, and now you are to come back and dine with me. I ordered a nice little

dinner to be ready early ; and you must tell me all that has happened since we parted."

At night, after the play, the old man took her hand, and said,

"You are up to the mark ; we must get you an engagement in London. You have made good use of your time, and I am quite satisfied with you. I have a piece of news to tell you to-morrow. Good night, now."

Bianca went home very happy ; she seemed to have come suddenly in sight of the realization of all her hopes.

The next morning early, her good genius arrived ; he had a letter in his hand.

"There," said he, "write at once to —, of Covent Garden, state what you want him to do, and enclose this letter from me. I think it will help your business. Now, what will you give me for my news?"

"Tell me first, and perhaps—but we shall see."

"Well then, the father of your friend Conrad is seriously ill. It is very unlikely that at his age he should recover, so I do not suppose he will stand in your way much longer. And what is more, his medical man told me that he had ordered his son to be sent for from Germany, or wherever he may be."

"How long is this ago?" said Bianca, eagerly ; "he has never written me word."

"Perhaps not," replied the other, drily ; "he is such an affectionate son that he can think of nothing

else—but I should say that he had been in England for the last fortnight.”

“I do not believe it—I will not believe it!” said Bianca.

“Well, my dear, you know best. I have given you my authority, and I have given you my conclusions from the same. My advice to you, is, that you keep yourself quiet, and let the first thing he hears of you be an immense triumph; do not let him *find* you where he *left* you. I take quite as much interest in your success, as if you were a child of my own; but you must let yourself be guided by me; when you women get hold of a love affair, you make that your business, and the most important things which concern your real interest, you make your play; but you are all alike.”

“What would you have me do?” said Bianca, impatiently.

“Just this,—make no attempt to communicate with him, press on your business in London, and do not see him till after you have made your *début*. You will need all your energies, and if *he* comes in your way I know how it will be; you will be taken up with him, and let every thing else go to the devil.”

After a few more words, Bianca promised to follow his advice, and he left her clinging with intense eagerness to the idea that her success in London would dissipate the last obstacle between herself and Conrad, and concentrating all her energies to bring it to pass.

The information given to Bianca was quite correct. Conrad actually was in England. He had not written to Bianca, though, to do him justice, it had several times struck him that he ought to do so; but, on his arrival, he found his father extremely ill, and he had quite enough to occupy him, and keep him from doing any thing he had no particular inclination for. About a fortnight after his return, his father died; and then he pacified his conscience by thinking that after he had arranged his affairs a little, he would go down to Bath, and take Bianca by surprise.

Bianca all this while was in a suppressed fever with anxiety.

Her worldly affairs, however, went on smoothly enough.

The manager sent a prompt and polite answer to her application, offering to give her at once an opportunity of making her *début*, and an engagement to the end of the season if she succeeded. So far, all was well, and having, with some difficulty, induced her present manager to release her from the remainder of her engagement with him, Bianca started for London, to throw all her hopes upon the cast.

There was a great deal of preliminary worry to be gone through, and several vexatious delays, before every thing was fairly *en train* for her appearance. She had chosen Juliet for her first appearance, chiefly, if we are to tell the truth, because she believed it was a play of good omen to her. It was in that part Conrad had seen her, four years ago.

Her old friend was indefatigable. He made her rehearse with him in her own lodgings; gave her every instruction that his genius or judgment could suggest; he had set his heart on her success, and was living his own career over again in her.

Bianca exaggerated to herself the audience before whom she was to appear, and, as the night drew near, felt great trepidation.

"My dear child," said her friend, "you have been a very good girl, indeed; very docile in listening to instruction; and now I tell you, that you exceed every thing I had conceived of the part—you are the woman for whom the stage has long waited; whom I desired, but never hoped to see; and now I shall die satisfied. Only be true to yourself; have no fear, for that is beneath you."

The eventful night at length actually arrived, and Bianca's anxieties centred in one thought—"Would Conrad be in the theatre?" If he were in London he could not be ignorant of her presence, for her appearance had been underlined, in immense letters of every colour, all over London; those who ran could not avoid reading of the "immense attraction," held forth that night by the theatre of Covent Garden!

The curtain drew up! the play began. She was received with immense applause, and called before the curtain at the end of the first act. The enthusiasm went on increasing to the end, when it seemed to exceed all bounds; bouquets, bracelets, wreaths, every possible

missile of admiration were flung at her in profusion. Her old friend met her at the side as she came off trembling, exhausted, and sick at heart.

"My dear girl," said he, warmly, "let me thank you for the happiness you have given me this night!"

"Let me go home," was all the reply he received.

"But, my darling child, you will change your dress first?"

"No, no, no; for pity's sake let me go home—I cannot remain here," said she, vehemently.

Tenderly, as if she had been a child, he lifted her into his own carriage, which was waiting. He had no difficulty in divining the cause of her suffering—*Conrad had not been present!* He did not speak to her during their course, nor did he attempt to enter the house with her. He pressed her hand affectionately, saying, "I shall look in upon you some time to-morrow.—Poor girl, poor girl," muttered he, as he drove away, "I see how it is going to be! Why will women give in to a *grande passion*, and make themselves miserable; if they did but know it, there is not a man amongst us all who deserves it!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHEN Bianca's maid entered the bed-room she was startled to see her mistress extended at full length on the floor. Her exclamation roused Bianca, who immediately arose and in a quiet voice desired her to take away those bouquets, and then to undress her.

"I shall just go and put them into water, Miss Bianca, for I never saw such beauties; they are all hot-house flowers, and will set off the drawing-room beautifully."

"Do what you like with them, only do not let me see them again; throw them down any where, and attend to me, I am not going to wait all night till you have attended to your own fancies."

The attendant knew Bianca's humour, and began without reply to disencumber her of her stage dress. Bianca did not mean to be unkind when she spoke thus hastily, but the great strain on her energies, day after day, made her irritable; she was often harsh in her manner, and required much patient forbearance; but the woman really loved Bianca, and supported these spurts

of temper in silence, never attempting to justify herself; and this patience won more on Bianca than if she had received a signal service. Gentleness and forbearance are never wasted except on cold and *egoiste* natures, who receive all things as their due, and never give but what is of scrupulous measure and temperament, looking with a stony composure to ascertain "what ought to be expected;" who carefully watch their sensibilities to prevent their boiling over, and who shrink from acting on an impulse because they "know not to what it might lead them." Surely, people might as well go to the devil in a fit of enthusiasm as stand petrified into a pillar of salt, for him to come and fetch them, to the great deliverance of the place they have kept in barrenness. People like Bianca love those who bear with them; and to those who love, much is forgiven. People in general are ready to pardon any sin that does not seem as if it arose from want of feeling.

The next morning Bianca's maid entered laden with newspapers and letters of congratulation. Bianca appeared asleep, but opened her eyes as the light streamed through the curtains.

"Well, Margaret, what letters?"

"Oh, a great plenty, Miss Bianca, and I hope they will please you," said the woman, drawing aside the window-blind.

Bianca looked hastily over the outside of the letters, but none were directed in *his* hand. She then seized a newspaper, not to look at the notice of her own ap-

pearance, but in the vague hope of seeing something about *him*. In the account of fashionable occurrences she found amongst many other equally choice pieces of information, that Viscount Melton had been "enter-taining a select party of guests at his seat in Staffordshire;" and in the next paragraph she saw it recorded that Conrad Percy, Esq., returned the day before from Melton Hall, where he had been staying on a visit to Lord Melton.

When people are in an uncertainty about a friend's affection, they catch eagerly at any straw, and try to believe it a firm rock. When those we love have grieved us, or given cause to doubt them, we seize thankfully on the shadow of an excuse, for laying the blame on ourselves. The more we love them, the more passionately do we feel the need to forgive them.

Bianca began immediately to fancy she had been unjust to Conrad, and she was so glad to find he had not been in town that she forgot to reflect how emphatically her own appearance had been announced in all the journals.

There seems to be two separate individuals in our own single embodiment, and sometimes it would be laughable, if it were not sad, to see the pains that one half takes to persuade the other, of something which it desires to find true; but the infidel half is always stronger than the believing one; and we are made very miserable and uneasy by this inner contention.

The day passed slowly over; Conrad did not come, and fevered and weary, she went to the theatre in the evening.

At the end of the first act, she returned to her dressing-room. A note had just arrived; it contained but one line,

"May I see you after the play? I will be waiting for you.
"CONRAD."

Bianca went through the remainder of the play as if she had been inspired. HE was present, and it was at his feet she was laying her success. She had worked for long years in the hope of making herself worthy of him before all the world. And this night was, to her, the dedication of herself and her work to him, for whom she had toiled. She rejoiced now, that he had not seen her whilst any doubt hung over her success; it was not an *attempt* she wished to offer to him, but an approved and perfected work. She had been stamped with public success, and now she felt greedy of applause, that she might have her triumph so much the more splendid to fling at his feet. She recollected that night at the circus, when he first witnessed her efforts; she was then only anxious about what he would think of her; but now she had become a finished artist; she knew her art, and was conscious of her own mastery over it; she did not now feel anxious for his praise or admiration for what she was doing, she only desired him to sit like a God

above her, that she might lay her gifts upon his altar.

When the curtain fell, she flew upstairs to her dressing-room; but her agitation was so violent, that she could hardly support herself whilst Margaret changed her dress. She trembled so much, that she nearly fell in attempting to descend the stairs.

Good God! men suffer more on the threshold of a long desired happiness, than if they were entering a torture-chamber.

At the stage door Conrad was standing negligently, and looking with a mixture of contempt and curiosity at all that was passing; his head was turned, and he did not perceive Bianca till she was close beside him. He saw she was agitated, and, without speaking a word, lifted her into the carriage, and followed her himself. He, too, was moved at the sight of one he had once so much loved; but he was not prepared for the passionate emotion with which Bianca, suffocated with sobs, flung herself on his breast. He was embarrassed, and almost frightened at the sight of such strong emotion; he had nothing within his own soul to meet it, and he was oppressed with it. Still he caressed her tenderly; but he felt awkward, and feared lest she should discover how much less fervent his feelings were than hers. But his vanity was soothed, and that enabled him to go through a scene which, on its own merits, was very wearisome. "Half the men in London would envy me, if they saw me;"—and this reflection gave a fictitious

value to his position. When a man has once got over his passion for a woman, he finds her demonstrations of attachment very irksome; if they proceeded from the most indifferent woman in the world they would please him better, because there would be at least something open—he is not *sure*, beforehand, that she may not prove the yet unseen queen of his soul: but a woman whom he has once passionately loved and forgotten, has neither hope nor mystery remaining for him; she is a discovered enigma. No matter what noble or precious qualities lie within her—he has explored them, and found they cannot enrich *him*; there is no more to hope, or expect, or discover. Bianca had just one chance of regaining Conrad, and but one, and that she flung away within the first hour of their meeting. Her position was so changed, her whole nature was so matured and developed, within the four years of their separation, that she was, in fact, a new creature. Had there been the least uncertainty, the least difficulty, the least appearance of indifference, Conrad might have been stimulated into a desire to regain his empire over this brilliant creature; but when she flung herself upon him, and let him see so clearly that she was still the same Bianca as of old, that same Bianca of whom he had become weary, and that her affection was as glowing and overpowering as ever, the faint spark was quenched which might have become a flame, and he felt something like displeasure at her, for being more constant than himself. However, he began to express all the admiration he felt for her acting, and to foretell all

sorts of glories for her. "You surpassed all my expectations, Bianca, and realised all that could be embodied in a dramatic Muse. What other actresses may have been in their generation I know not—but you make all who behold you very thankful that they live in this."

"Oh!" cried Bianca, impatiently, "do not praise me, *you*—other people can say all they think about my genius, it is for you I have laboured—it is for you I have endeavoured to make myself of some value, to make myself worthy of you. Of what worth is my genius to me except that! Only tell me that you do not despise it, that you love me as you did when last we parted, that is all I care to know. The praise I get from others is for you to put your feet upon—it kills me to be *praised* by you."

Conrad never liked to give pain. He could do cruel things when his own comfort or inclination were at stake, but he had not nerve enough to give pain before his own eyes; he had, to do him justice, a fund of good-nature. He felt worried to see people suffer, and therefore he did his best now, to say and do all that was expected from him. If she had only shown one tithe of the passion she manifested, it would have been a much easier task; but now he felt all enterprise or enthusiasm choked out of him by her vehemence. Men are beasts of prey in their souls; they desire or value nothing but what they conquer with difficulty, or some sort of violence; and they require to find an antagonising resistance.

When they arrived at Bianca's residence he entered along with her. She had become calmer, and they got on more pleasantly together. There was much to hear and to tell on both sides—he felt really interested in her progress, for it was in some sort the work of his own hands. She gave the history of her life since they parted with great spirit, and it amused him much more than her love. He also had to tell her about himself, and his own doings; but, as might be expected, with great modifications. He entered warmly into all her plans and prospects, and expressed the most zealous anxiety to serve her—in which he was quite sincere; and they talked with all the intimacy of earlier days, but still her eyes hung restlessly and inquiringly upon him. She was thirsting for some definite expression of love, and there was an innate honesty, or perverseness, or devilry in him, which hindered him speaking the desired word. He would really have been very glad to pacify her, but he could not find it in his heart. At half-past eleven he rose to go, saying it would not be right to let her keep him longer; but promised she should either see or hear from him on the morrow.

When the door closed behind him it jarred on Bianca's inmost soul. She felt baffled and disappointed, though the charm of Conrad's presence still lingered round her like a perfume, making her believe, even in spite of herself, that she *must* be happy; she sat for some moments stupified, and gazed with a bewildered look round the room, as if it were impossible this strange blank could remain. "Nothing, *nothing*,

is it all nothing?" she cried, at last, in a tone of such desolation, that it must have wrung the heart if any had heard it. She leaned her head on the table, and a gush of tears, heavy and passionate as a tropical shower, relieved her oppressed heart. Her sobbings gradually subsided, and she arose calm, and even hopeful. "He does not love me as I would have him," said she to herself, "but, surely, now that I have made myself worthy of him, it will not be difficult to win him. Men cannot stand absence like women—he is not to blame."

CHAPTER XXX.


BIANCA'S popularity kept at its high-tide—every phase that worldly prosperity could assume seemed presented to her ; a magnificent engagement, praise in prose and verse, until the very flowers of speech drooped and faded under the warmth of flattery. Lovers of every grade presented themselves in squadrons, and she had more invitations to balls, soirées, dinners, déjeunés, and réunions, of every kind, than she could have attended in a dozen years ; for no sooner was it satisfactorily asserted that not the shadow of a shade rested on her “perfect respectability,” than people began without fear to do their share towards rewarding so much virtue, by lighting it up with their “countenance.” Her personal manners, and extreme agreeableness in conversation, kept up the prepossession in her favour, and gave her a *succés*, as marked in its way, as that she had achieved in her profession ; she remained to the end of the season, a lion of the first magnitude.

All this, if it did not revive Conrad's passion, at

least stimulated his vanity, and effectually checked any thought he might have entertained about breaking off their engagement. She was so beautiful, and so devoted to him, that he could not help feeling a sort of tenderness for her.

It was really very flattering to find a woman like that, keeping up her attachment to him, through years of absence, much neglect, and (although she never suspected it) infidelities of every kind. Still, LOVE is too grand in its own nature—too divine, no matter how it may be debased, to be kept alive entirely by gratified vanity: it will neither be bribed nor compelled.

Conrad's ideas of the female character had become much changed during his residence abroad, and Bianca was no longer the kind of woman who captivated his imagination. He had become thoroughly disgusted with all that was theatrical, or had a tinge of display in women. He had lived both in Vienna and Paris, and had seen the "French-novel style of women," as he called them, in every phase and variety, till he was thoroughly wearied, and took up extremely strict ideas of the simplicity, timid innocence, and shrinking delicacy, that ought to be found in women; he had a dove-like ideal, which he thought perfection, and the only woman who would have had a chance of touching his heart, would have been some white-robed vestal whom he should only have been allowed to see at a distance, and who would have had the grace to shrink back with alarmed modesty, had he attempted



a nearer approach. The nearest realisation he had ever seen of his present ideas of womanhood, was at a flower-show, a few days after he saw Bianca. A young Quakeress was walking with a stout and stupid-looking old gentleman, who seemed to be her father; any other relationship would have disgusted Conrad's fastidious taste, for he had a notion that women ought only to appear in public with their fathers or their husbands—and this lovely creature, in her delicate bonnet, and shadow-coloured gown, with her complexion of the softest and faintest red and white, and her large timid blue eyes, which sank under his ardent gaze, was decidedly with her father. She had, also, a sweet voice, like the whisper of a breeze; although the only words he caught were "My father, let us go home." And the stout old gentleman, roused from his abstraction, perceived, and cast a furious glance at the dashing looking Conrad, who had not then sacrificed his Austrian moustaches, and hastily carried off his daughter to a sober chocolate-coloured chariot, drawn by a single fat black horse, which drove gently off, leaving Conrad perfectly entranced with admiration at the modesty of English women, and the prudent guard kept over them by English fathers. "Ah," said he, to his friend Lord Melton, who just then rejoined him, "if women did but know how much men admire the delicate timidity which makes them look like a half-opened rose, they surely would never give in to that audacious confidence which can meet a man's eye without blushing."

“And all women are positively to be made after the likeness of your fancy—to please *you*! well, I call that modest and reasonable.

‘Concluding in my hours of glee,
This world was only made for me.’

“I went to see Bianca last night; now she seems to me much more like an ideal woman than any little undeveloped girl blushing amid her lilies and roses. What a noble look and presence has Bianca! something in her voice and manner announces *reality*. What she utters seems only the shadowing forth of what lies within in greater perfection. I would give the world to be presented to her.”

“If you will come along with me now, I am going to see her, and will introduce you; but I thought you had always kept clear of actresses.”

“I have a great dislike to all green-room associates, I dislike intensely what you call ‘actress women;’ but when I see strong genius bearing that indescribable impress of being a genuine utterance from *within*, and not a mere artistic display for the sake of personal honour and glory, I can honour it even though it takes the guise of an actress exercising her profession. But how do you come to know her? you are the first man I have asked who pretends to claim any sort of acquaintance; she might have dropped from the skies for what any one seems to know about her.”

“I got acquainted with her by a singular accident many years ago, and knew her well before I went abroad; all the people who are now applauding her as the last

eight wonder that has come to pass, are only coming round to what I thought of her when she was in a fifth rate position at a provincial theatre; she is a very wonderful woman, and I have the highest respect for her."

"I am half afraid of destroying the impression she has produced already, by seeing her more nearly."

"You need not be," said Conrad; "you will admire her more in private than on the stage, and you may take it as a compliment that I offer to present you, for I feel as jealous what men come near her as if she were my—sister."

Lord Melton and Conrad had become acquainted abroad, and had renewed their intimacy since his return; he was about thirty, and had only recently come to his title; he was extremely handsome, large dark blue eyes, and a remarkably sweet expression of countenance, in spite of a shade of *hauteur* in his manners which at first sight seemed to contradict it. He was a man of very fine character, and a thorough gentleman, which is the highest praise that can be given to a man, for it takes the perfection of many excellencies to make one. He had great reverence for women, and was never heard in his life to say a harsh or a coxcomical thing about them; he was a keen judge both of men and things, and quite as fastidious in his notions as Conrad, though much more candid and charitable in his opinions.

Bianca was alone when they entered; the flash of pleasure that passed over her face and kindled her eyes, as she saw Conrad, did not escape Lord Melton, and did

not strike him in the sisterly light which she had been represented in by Conrad. She received him with frank cordiality, and Conrad felt flattered by the impression she evidently produced on his friend, for whose judgment he had a great respect. It had a good result for Bianca, it increased her value in his eyes, and for several days after he treated her with some return of his old manners. If Bianca had possessed a spark of coquetry she would have got on much better, for men are so soon wearied of any thing like tenderness—and of all men Conrad could the least stand being too well treated; he had that perverted love of power which takes the shape of cruelty; he liked to tyrannise over Bianca, to make her suffer; he liked to feel that whilst other men were worshipping and flattering her, he could make her days dark or bright by the alternations of his humour; and he liked to enjoy this power in secret, for he was careful never to compromise himself in the eyes of the world by his attendance on her. Though there were a dozen reports flying about that she was engaged to one person or another, Conrad was never talked about; any superior intimacy was all set down to the score of his being an old friend who had helped her in her career many years before. What his ultimate intentions were perhaps he did not know exactly himself; he was extremely jealous of every man who came near her, and was as arbitrary in the behaviour he exacted from her towards all aspirants to her favour as if he had been her most ardent lover. Like all men who have been lax in their own conduct, he had most rigid ideas

of what women ought to be; and Bianca, who had taken care of herself all her life, and had a frank decided manner of bearing herself and expressing her own opinions, was constantly warring against the ideal female standard which he was constantly preaching up to her—being most unreasonably dissatisfied because she continued to be—*herself*!

Her friend the old actor frequently came to her, but it so happened that he always missed Conrad, although he had a great desire to see him. Perhaps Bianca had some share in this, for she did not like any other visitor when Conrad was with her; he, on his side, was extremely glad whenever any one came in to break the *tête-à-tête*. However, one day, soon after Lord Melton's visit, the actor and Conrad met at Bianca's house, and took an intense antipathy to each other. Conrad professed to have an engagement, shortened his visit, and went away with a look Bianca well knew when he was displeased—leaving Bianca very *distrain* and miserable.

"My dear Bianca," said the old man, kindly but gravely, "that man will break your heart; it is of no use your trying to make a hero of him, for he is not one, and never will be one, and you will only break yourself against the iceberg of his self-love; he has no idea of any thing higher than himself; he has no notion of any excellence but what pleases him; *self*, with him, is 'the first, last, midst, and without end' of earthly things, and as you are not conformed to his image, you will have no comfort with him. I do not deny that he has been of

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great service to you, that he has in some things behaved very well—but you must have the courage to break with him, or he will work you ill. He does *not* love you, and he is capable of holding you on and on to an indefinite engagement, and leaving you at last when it suits him. It has been my profession always to read indications of character, and I tell you that unless you assert yourself, you will be broken in pieces and trodden under foot by that man; you are standing in a false position with him.”

“Oh, indeed you are judging him harshly—you do not know him,” cried Bianca; “I am too *exigéante*—I know I am not what he requires a woman to be; but that is my fault for coming short, not his for having a high standard, and he tries to serve me in all practical things. Oh, he is very good;—it is you who do not know him.”

“Bah!” said her friend—“I suppose women came into the world under an engagement to talk a certain amount of nonsense before they die. You are just as great a fool as any woman I ever knew; I will never talk to you again; you must take your own way;—but come! if you are going to the theatre I will take you.”

The next time Bianca saw Conrad, the first words he uttered were—“My dear Bianca, I wish you to get rid of that actor friend of yours—I dislike him extremely; and, considering my objection to being mixed up with your stage people, I think you might keep him at a distance. If my wishes have any weight, you will cease to receive him.”

"But, Conrad, consider how much I owe to him—what a friend he is to me. I am sorry you do not like him, but I shall not give him up; you are unreasonable to ask such a thing."

"Unreasonable to ask you to cease to receive a man who annoys me! but I see, my opinion has little influence when opposed to your own headstrong ideas. I say no more, except that I do not choose to be exposed to meeting this actor whenever I come."

Other visitors came in, and put a stop to further words. Conrad did not recover his temper, and Bianca was for once thoroughly provoked at the arrogant and overbearing tone he had assumed; she was far too much attached to her old friend to think of even appearing to yield to Conrad's demand, and she did not condescend to make the least concession, but left him to recover his temper at his leisure. After about a week's sulkiness he came round to his normal state; and finding that there really were some limits to his power, he behaved rather better to Bianca till the end of the season.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE season in London had come to an end. Bianca, and every body, went their several ways to follow their private devices.—Bianca went down into the country to fulfil several provincial engagements. Conrad, as his father's executor, had still much business on hand. Amongst other things he had to see Mr. Bryant; with whom, in later years, his father had become associated in many speculations. "What an odd coincidence," thought he, "that almost the first visit I have to pay, after meeting Bianca again, should be to the very place where I first fell in love with her; and the very last place in the world I would willingly revisit. My recollection of those Bryants is unmitigated stupidity." Nevertheless, he wrote a highly polite letter to Bryant, to tell him that he would come to him for a couple of days. Alice and Bryant were at breakfast when the letters came in. Alice had only a few casual correspondents, and felt little interest in the post-bag.

"There, Alice!" said Bryant, handing her one of his letters—"it is from young Percy, who was here a few

years ago. You cannot have forgotten him, for he fell in love, or some mischief, with that actress protégée of yours. He will be wiser by this time, it is to be hoped. You see he talks of coming down for a couple of days, and we must be civil to him."

"Dear! how very tiresome," said Alice, "I wanted to go for a fortnight to the sea-side. Your sister will be quite vexed if I disappoint her."

"Well, my dear, it cannot be helped," replied her husband; "he is coming on business, but, if he feels inclined to stay for a little shooting, we must invite him; and, once for all, I wish you to be civil to him."

"I don't think he will care much for that," said Alice. "I think he was, without exception, the most disagreeable young man I ever remember to have seen; he used hardly to speak to me; and then, he always seemed to think nothing was good enough for him. I think I will invite Mrs. Frank Greville and her daughter for two or three days. She is a young lady who finds no young man a bore, and then the civility will have been paid, and I shall be glad to have it over. Two disagreeable things transacted together."

"Just as you please, my dear," said Bryant, who was now deep in a letter from St. Petersburg, about iron rails; "only it is a pity you seem to find every thing disagreeable you have to do. I wish you could take an interest in something. I think it must be because you do not employ yourself enough—you should walk out more. But I must be off," continued he, gathering up his letters. "I have an appointment at

ten o'clock. What time do you dine? But no matter, do not wait for me. I know I cannot spare the time to come to dinner."

"But," said Alice, discontentedly, as he was leaving the room, "am not I to see you all day?"

"I fear not; I am so harassed with business—if there were thirty-six hours to the day I should have too little time for the engagements I must complete."

When Alice was left alone, the tears filled her eyes: she had learned not to let her husband see them, but not to restrain them. "I am nothing to him," said she, bitterly; "nothing compared to his business. If I were dead to-morrow he would never miss me, except perhaps when he had a dinner-party. I am of use to no one, and not a creature cares for me. Bryant could make me so happy if he cared for me ever so little, or if I could do any thing that would please him."

After indulging herself in these meditations a little, she began to water her plants, and then walked round her drawing-room, to see that all the ornaments and *bijouterie* were rightly arranged; then she had an interview with her housekeeper, and gave her orders, and regulated her accounts; after that she wrote a note, in a beautiful delicate hand, on perfumed paper, to her sister-in-law, to tell her that a dreadfully disagreeable visitor was coming, which would prevent her joining them at Blackpool; after which, she wrote another note to Mrs. Greville, inviting her and her daughter to come and stay a few days, adding that they were expecting to see "a friend of her husband's, a young officer in the

Austrian service." This she knew would secure them both, and she began to be in better heart about the next week's prospect. After she had despatched her letters to the post, as the day was wet, and she could not go out of doors, and no visitor could be expected, she sat down to work at a large ottoman, which had been long on hand; then she practised for a little while some music she had just received, and read *Ernest Maltravers*, then recently published, and thought that she was much in the situation of Valerie de St. Ventadour, although her husband bore not the smallest resemblance. She was interrupted during its progress by the unexpected arrival of Bryant, who had been suddenly called to Liverpool on business, which would possibly detain him for two days. After the excitement of preparing his portmanteau, giving him a hasty luncheon, and seeing him depart, had subsided, she had nothing further to break the monotony of her day. She finished her novel, and, wearied in heart and depressed in spirit, she retired to rest.

Such was the average manner in which Alice passed her days. Her husband lived in a world apart; he loved her more than any thing else in the world; but he was engrossed in arduous business undertakings, which tasked all his energies;—he had no leisure to be a companion to his wife, or to provide her either with occupation or amusement. Any thing she might express a desire to have, he would procure without regard to trouble or expense; but he would never think of it himself. When they were together, he was invariably

kind and affectionate, but often abstracted and silent;—the quiet, calm manners, which had at first attracted Alice towards him, became, at length, mysterious and repellent to her; she grew afraid of him, and timid in the expression of her affection; she desired only to discover in what she might please him, whilst he was only anxious that she should amuse herself, and make herself happy her own way. Constantly occupied himself with affairs of deep importance, he had no idea of the weight of *ennui* which was eating out the life of Alice. He was not in the least insensible to Alice's demonstrations of affection, although it was not in his nature to be demonstrative himself; and he sometimes wished his wife to be a little less sensitive and romantic. Above all, if he had been in the least practically aware of the intense mischief of *idleness*, he would hardly have taken the questionable step of inviting a dashing, unoccupied young man, very little younger than his wife, to come and spend even two days under his roof.

If Alice had fallen into the hands of a man who could have attended to her, or if she had possessed a friend who could have obtained a salutary influence over her, she might have become an exquisite character. She had that peculiar quality in women, to receive in perfection the impression designed for them by a mind superior to their own. She would have become all that a superior man could have desired for a companion; she would have reproduced his thoughts and aspirations with a grace beyond his imaginings; she

would have been himself, "in finer clay." Depending upon him, taking her whole being from him, she would have loved him with a devotedness, the graceful clinging tenderness of which would have prevented any shade of passionateness or sense of violence. She had not it in her to stand *alone*. She was destitute of the strong internal energy which might have supplied the absence of external support,—and she drooped like a delicate plant, weighed down under a treasure of precious fruit, which, for want of due tending, might never come to perfection, but would fall away in unripened promise. Although she had so little active energy, yet she had an immense power of passive resistance to all influences that did not come in the guise of something superior to herself. Nothing coarse, sordid, or vulgar, could touch the indestructible refinement which was the leading quality in her character. As to her *principles*, she had been all her life educated and thrown amongst highly moral and respectable people; but no motive fit to actuate a rational being had ever been presented to her. She had a vague, poetical sense of religion, but no notion of any practical influence from it. What she heard preached in church was too vague and too prosaic to take any sort of hold on her daily life. She had never dreamed of transgressing any of the conventional rules of society, which, to her, were synonymous with virtue and propriety;—the idea of questioning them had never occurred to her. She had a morbid conscientiousness, which made her painfully anxious to do right, without

ever feeling satisfied with any of her own actions ; but she had not a single strong abiding principle of right or wrong to govern her as by a moral necessity, from which there could be no appeal. She had the instinct of looking to those around her, to know what she ought to do—to her husband especially, who constantly gave her the baffling reply—"Do just whatever you think best!" Such was the aspect of her life and character, at the time circumstances brought Conrad on his second visit.

It was splendid weather, towards the latter end of the month of September, when Mrs. Greville and her daughter drove up the avenue to "Raven Hall," and were received in the hall by Alice with much cordiality.

Mrs. Greville was quite the finest lady of Alice's acquaintance, who had, therefore, invited her as the fittest pendant to the very fine gentleman she fancied Conrad to be ; indeed, she was very thankful to have any one whom she thought Mrs. Greville might feel an interest in meeting, for Mrs. Greville had an inordinate desire to know people who moved in rather better circles than she did herself ; in short, to rise in society was her ruling passion. She was the wife of the proprietor of extensive glass-works, about ten miles from Alice's neighbourhood ; and they lived in great style at an ancient family seat, which had formerly belonged to a noble family, but had been bought some years previously by Mr. Greville, along with a good deal of the adjoining land. Mrs. Greville was in great hopes that now they had bought an estate, they would come to be re-

ceived amongst the county families, with whom she cherished an acquaintance, which was somewhat languishing, in spite of her zeal. She was many years older than Alice, cold and repulsive in her general manners, extremely haughty, and not at all handsome; but she dressed with great taste, was well informed, and decidedly clever, and could be very agreeable indeed when she thought it worth her while; she was insatiable after amusement, and every thing or person that could in any way contribute to it was unscrupulously placed in requisition, and cultivated just so far as either chanced to promote it; but none could ever flatter themselves that they obtained the smallest hold on her sympathies. She rather considered it a condescension to visit Alice; but then she lived in a beautiful house, and it was a nice place to bring her friends to when they came to visit her, and Alice was so very elegant-looking, that it gave a good impression of her general acquaintances, when she produced her at her most select dinner parties. Her daughter, Miss Rosina, was a pretty, stylish-looking girl, who had been fashionably educated and finished at a Parisian school, which entitled her to be a leader amongst her own set. Her mother intended her to marry extremely well, by which she understood some one above her in rank, for she always said she "thought family of so much more importance in these days than fortune, which she supposed every body possessed who chose."

These ladies arrived and were consigned to their dressing-rooms, some time before Conrad made his

appearance; he had grown much handsomer and more manly-looking than when Alice had last seen him. Also, he wore a magnificent pair of moustaches, and he had a firm self-possessed suavity of manner which was extremely prepossessing; he addressed Alice with a frank and yet respectful friendliness, which at once dissipated all her prejudices against him.

Alice always appeared to the greatest advantage when at the head of her table, which is just the position that tries a woman's manners more than any other. Conrad was extremely struck by the grace with which she presided, and the taste which was evident in all her arrangements. Her unpretentious, quiet manner, also struck him forcibly, contrasted as it was with the elaborate self-consequence of the other two ladies; Mrs. Greville he disliked intensely the first instant he saw her, and the young lady was far too self-confident, too dashing, and too much disposed to flirt, to meet his views of what was becoming in women: however, she thought him extremely charming, and was very well pleased to find no other young ladies present; for she naturally considered that her mother and Mrs. Bryant counted for nothing, and took to him as her lawful prey: there were one or two other gentlemen present, but she did not consider them worth her attention. "What an exquisite creature!" said Conrad to himself, gazing after Alice, as she quitted the dining-room, "she looks like a swan amongst crows."

There was a party in the evening, which went off rather heavily. Mrs. Greville did not consider any of

them quite entitled to be treated with her agreeable phase, and, therefore sat in what she considered aristocratic dignity and indifference, seasoned occasionally with a little impertinence. Her daughter flirted in the most *prononcé* manner with Conrad, proud of having such a stylish cavalier attached to her side ; but Conrad chose to consider himself as in the service of his hostess, and exerted himself most zealously to aid Alice to amuse a set of people, who had no notion of amusing themselves. There was a little music, and some singing ; Miss Greville favoured the company with an elaborate specimen of brilliant fingering and execution, and she sang too, on request, with the air of a person who had earned a reputation. All this was very wearying to Conrad ; but he was repaid by the pleasure of watching the quiet grace with which Alice moved through these unelastic and unstimulating elements. " She realises my idea of an English lady," said he, as he lay down that night.

The next day, they were to go to a dinner-party, and in the morning they were to drive to see some ruins ; it certainly was, in itself, a very stupid visit ; but Conrad felt it a gleam from Eden, and he thanked Bryant many times, for allowing him to see thoroughly English life, and expressed himself so warmly that Bryant cordially invited him to come to see them whenever he liked, and to consider that there would be always a bed at his service.

Bryant had been much pleased with the young man,

—in the executor business between them Conrad had shown great business talent, and so much deference to Bryant, that his good opinion might be a little bribed; but there had been a great friendship between himself and the father, which he felt quite disposed to continue to the son.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE first news Bianca heard, when she came up to town to fulfil her engagement for the ensuing season, was the death of her old friend, the actor, who had expired after a short illness at the house of a friend, with whom he was on a visit. It was a great sorrow to Bianca, who regarded him almost as a father. He left her, by his will, his furnished house at Brompton, and a considerable legacy in money. All the goods of this life seemed to be showered on Bianca at once; and the one thing she once hoped they would be the means of obtaining for her, seemed further off than ever.

When Conrad came up to London, she was struck with the change in his behaviour: he seemed to have taken an intense dislike to every thing she did; he found fault with her attachment to her profession; found fault with her for conversing in company; objected to her manners, as independent and unfeminine; in short, was as harsh and disagreeable as the terms

on which he stood with her gave him the right to be. One day, when she complained of his want of common politeness, he replied, "My dear Bianca, I speak to you, as if you were my wife; there are no grounds of mere politeness between us; what I say to you is for your good, and you would do more wisely to profit by it, than to carp at the mere manner." Above all, he was jealous and annoyed at the legacy which had been left her; that the old actor was dead, and would never offend him more, was hardly sufficient atonement; he quarrelled bitterly with Bianca, because she took up her abode in the pleasant house that had become her own. "Fancy ALICE flaunting in a legacy left her by an actor!" he ejaculated to himself. "What a difference between the two women!"

Lord Melton became Bianca's constant visitor; every day he grew more and more attracted towards her; he was somewhat puzzled as to the terms on which Conrad stood with her, for the latter had not mentioned his engagement to him; but he never for one moment surmised aught derogatory to her honour: he saw several things he could not explain, but he had firm confidence that she had a satisfactory reason for all she did. Each time that he was in her presence, strengthened the empire she had acquired over him. She on her side, admired him extremely; she had a profound respect for his judgment and opinion; his gentle delicate kindness, which was shown in a thousand unobtrusive ways, won greatly upon her, and she felt him a refuge from Conrad's harshness and caprice: but with

all that, she never dreamed of loving him, or thought that he cared for her, except as a companionable friend, but went on rejoicing in his society, without thinking of the pain she was preparing for him. One day he came to her, grave, pre-occupied, and evidently out of spirits ; after various attempts to cheer him, she said, " What is the matter with you? you are grown like Conrad to-day—do not grow moody—but tell me what is vexing you?"

" I am very miserable," said he, " and that always renders people disagreeable ; will you let me ask you one question, and not think me impertinent—so much of my happiness depends on your answer. Will you tell me the terms you are on with Conrad? what *right* has *he* to be as disagreeable as I have made myself this morning? Are you engaged to him?"

" Oh!" said Bianca, with an expression of pain, " do not try to change the position in which you and I are together ; you are the friend I most value in the world. I cannot tell you the source of comfort your friendship and society are to me. You may, perhaps, not think it a compliment, but indeed, I can give you no higher praise,—I always feel with you, as if you were my *mother* ; you are so gentle, so delicate, so little *exigeant*, and I feel such a perfect confidence towards you ; it will deeply grieve me, if I have deceived or misled you, with regard to my sentiments, and I shall suffer bitterly, if our intercourse is broken up ; but you have a perfect right to ask the question, and an equal right to receive an explicit

reply. I *am* engaged to Conrad—and was so before he went abroad : he has grown cold and estranged of late; but he has never expressed a desire to be released; as you were his friend, I thought you were aware of it, or I would have told you before."

"And you, Bianca? do *you* wish to be released?"

"No!" replied Bianca, with an accent that instantly destroyed all hope in Lord Melton's breast.

"Then I have no further business here," said he, in a voice of deep mortification. "I thank you for your frankness."

"Oh, do not leave me in displeasure!" said Bianca, as he was rising to go. "What have I done to forfeit your friendship? Have I ceased to deserve that you should continue to me as you always have been? I grieve to give you pain; and you know not how thankfully I have treasured you as my best and most valued friend. Be generous—I cannot let you go away from me. If you knew all I am suffering, you would feel revenged for any ill I have unconsciously inflicted."

Tears filled Bianca's eyes as she spoke, and there was a tone of profound sadness in her words which touched Lord Melton to the heart, and made him think he had been most unjust, selfish, and unkind, ever to have thought of himself, or desired any return from her.

"I know," said he, in a subdued manner, "there is nothing in me to deserve you should love me for it; I ought to be satisfied, and feel honoured by the high place you accord me in your regard. Do with me what-

ever you will, only do not banish me from your presence, nor deprive me of the intimacy I have enjoyed;—let me be your friend—let me be of service or comfort to you, and I will ask no more;—tell me that you are not angry with me, that what has passed will make no difference in your feelings to me?”

“If I were to tell you all I feel for you at this moment,” said Bianca, half smiling, “you would build all sorts of wild thoughts upon it. I shall hold you very fast now that I have been so near losing you.”

Bianca’s servant entered and whispered something.

“I must send you away now,” said she, “for the Greek dress for my new part is come, and I shall be deep in stage millinery and finery for the rest of the morning; I dare not neglect it. You do not know how much dress has to do with our success.”

“Will you not let me see it,” said Lord Melton, pleadingly, “and then I shall know that I am reinstated.”

“Well, if you really wish to stay, you may, but I give you notice it will be very stupid work for you.—You can tell Madame Michaud to come in,” said she to the servant.

“I think a passion for dress must be in the primeval formation of a woman’s mind, as a geologist would express it,” said she, laughing. “How do you do, Madame Michaud—how have you succeeded?”

Madame, with many *minauderies*, unpacked and held up a superb Greek costume.

“Oh, how gorgeous!” exclaimed Bianca;—“ma-

dame, you are a woman of genius; if I make an impression in this part, half of it will be owing to you!"

"That is not a correct cap," said Lord Melton; "it is very pretty for a fancy dress, but it is not a real country cap."

"Pardonnez, monsieur," said madame, deeply offended.

"I have one I brought from Scio at home, that would be much better. Will you let me send it you?" said Lord Melton.

"I shall be too glad of it; I don't like this one myself, but I shall put it on now, to judge of the effect."

She returned in full costume, looking radiantly lovely.

"Have you a dagger amongst your treasures," said she.

"Yes, but I will not give it you. I am horridly superstitious."

"It is not one of my superstitions," said Bianca; "and yet I have so many, that I ought to respect those of other people. I think it is very unlucky to give hair; but a dagger is quite an exceptional thing. But now you must go in earnest, I am really going to be busy. You will return soon," said she, holding his hand as he was departing, and looking fixedly at him.

"*Very* soon," replied he, with meaning. "Do not fear me, you shall find me all you would have me."

He had not long departed, and the milliner was still there, taking directions for another stage dress, when Conrad came.

"Is not that a glorious costume?" cried she, spreading it before him.

"You know how much I dislike seeing the insignia of your profession. The effects are well enough, but I cannot endure to see them in process; you know how completely they are opposed to my taste, and you might have the delicacy to keep them out of my way."

Poor Bianca looked terribly mortified: she had hoped that Conrad would have admired her in the Greek dress; it was for him alone she wished to look well.

"I ought to have remembered you did not like women's finery," said she, submissively, and hastened to banish both the milliner and the dress, and all the paraphernalia that had got scattered about; and then came and seated herself, half timidly, beside Conrad, who had the grace to feel a little ashamed of his splenetic humour.

"I am a great brute to you sometimes, Bianca, and you are very patient with me. I do not deserve it—you are a great deal too good for me."

This was quite true; but Bianca did not believe it. She would thankfully have endured a much worse ill-humour for the sake of such an *amende* to make up for it. Conrad continued much kinder and more agreeable to the end of the visit, than he had been for a long time. At last he said: "I have engaged myself to dine with two friends of mine from Paris. Were you not saying something once about wishing to act in Paris, if a company could be got together? I will make inquiries, if

you like, to-day; they will be able to give a good opinion as to your probable success."

"Oh, how very kind you are!" said Bianca. "If you do not dislike it, I have it much at heart to go to Paris; but I would be governed by you."

"Well, I will speak to my friends, at any rate, and then we can talk further; but I must go now."

He took a very affectionate leave of her, and left her happier than she had been for many days.

Several days passed, and she saw nothing of him. She fancied he was engaged with his friends, and tried to be patient; but it was very hard work. At last, one morning, a letter from him was put into her hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BIANCA opened the note with a trembling hand, read it eagerly, and then flung it with a passionate gesture on the floor. Poor Bianca ! the note was not what she had hoped for. The perfume of love was not upon it ; there was not the glowing out-pouring of a heart to which utterance was an imperious necessity, and yet not expressing, but only giving indication of, the passionate depths within ; instead of this, there was kindness, and friendly interest ; a letter no third party could judge of, for the eye of one deeply loving could alone perceive all that was wanting. One line in particular maddened her ; it was at the end, "Dear Bianca ; be calm and wise : it is all you need, to be perfect."

"Calm and wise," echoed she, bitterly ; "how should I become so ? how should any woman be so without a strong and noble heart on which her poor beating, passionate soul may fling itself and find rest ? how should one thrown back upon herself be calm and wise ?"

At this instant Lord Melton entered ; she had been

so engrossed that she had not noticed his knock. Her flushed and agitated face told him at once that something was wrong, but her habitual control of manner did not forsake her. She welcomed him cordially, and began to converse on indifferent subjects; but her eyes, in spite of herself, kept filling with tears, and there was a touch of bitterness in all she said—a deeper meaning than her words conveyed. Lord Melton was pained to the very soul to see her thus suffering, but he thought it best to take no notice, except by that touching sympathy of manner, that genuine *manly* kindness, for which a woman, at such times, is so grateful. At length he rose to depart, without having obtained any sort of insight into what was grieving her.

“Oh, no, do not go yet,” said Bianca, entreatingly; “you do me so much good; sit still and talk on to me. I am not myself very amusing this morning, so it’s the more charity in you to stay.”

“Tell me then, Bianca,” said he, seating himself beside her on the sofa, “what it is that is distressing you. I cannot endure to see you suffer; if I am indiscreet, say so, but do not be displeased with me.”

“Nothing new,” said Bianca; “nothing but what to you would sound very trivial. I have been worried by a letter this morning, it only came just before you arrived, and I had not recovered myself.”

Lord Melton’s eyes fell, at this instant, on the crushed letter which had got itself pushed under the table; he knew it was in Conrad’s handwriting, and a pang of jealousy shot through his heart.

"Conrad has vexed you," said he, quickly ; " what has he done ?"

" It is a letter about my acting in Paris ; he has been taking a great deal of trouble to make inquiries, and get me proper introductions ; he has been very kind, but it is not always kindness alone that one requires."

" No," said Lord Melton, earnestly ; " there are times when kindness pains more than any ill-treatment. When we get kindness, where we looked for love, it is a desolate thing."

Bianca did not reply, but she looked up at Melton, and the tears streamed heavily over her face.

" Oh, Bianca, you are wasting all the treasures of your soul on a dream—on a delusion. Conrad is not the sort of man for you to love, he will never satisfy your tender and passionate nature. If he had it in him to make you happy I could resign you to him ; for I *love* you, Bianca, and to see you happy would satisfy me. I know it by the misery it gives me to see you suffer. Oh, Bianca, let me love you, let me be your near, dear, friend ; command me any way, and let me serve you. But I cannot endure to see you suffer thus."

" You *are* my friend," replied Bianca, " my near, dear, friend, I rely on your affection ; it is egotistic to draw, as I do, such strength and comfort from your friendship, from your *love*, for it well deserves that name, and to give you so little in return ; but you are the one being on whose firm strength and prudence I rely. It is to *you* I instinctively look, in all my difficul-

ties; *you* to whom I turn in all my troubles. You see," said she, smiling mournfully, "it is the old story from the beginning—the one devoted, and the other exacting; living on your offerings, exhaling your love—and glad of it. But I am of no good to you. I feel humbled before you. You are great and magnanimous, and, believe me, I know your worth. Bear with me, continue near me. What would become of me if *you* were to forsake me?"

"Oh, Bianca, you are very merciless. But I will stay beside you, I will never leave you till I see you happy. Command me in any way; I am yours,—body and soul. You do not love me; still, let me feel that I am necessary to you in any way. Let me *serve* you, and that is all the return I ask. Let me feel that *my* being is mixed with yours; in some way, however distant, that my life has not been in vain for you. The day when your happiness will be complete without me, when I can no longer be of use to you, this life will be closed on me for ever; all I live for will have departed from it. Bianca! the consciousness that I can serve you is almost a compensation for your love. You must love as I do, before you can know the blessing it is to give one's life to the one we love. You have been frank and noble, you have used no juggling and coquetry with me. By Heaven! I believe it only makes me love you more madly to see the love you feel for another; it makes you more grand in my eyes. And yet, if I see you *WITH* him—though you spare my feelings in every way—oh! then I am filled with rage and dumb anguish. I *hate* him, and feel that I could

kill him. It is only when he is absent, and I am alone with you, enjoying your dear confidence, possessing your friendship, that I can forgive you for loving him. But here, as I am now, at this moment, I ask no more. I feel that no one else can love you as I do; and that is a consciousness none can take from me."

Bianca's tears were falling fast. "Do not make me feel guilty, my dear friend," said she, taking his hand in both of hers; "do not sacrifice yourself to one who so little deserves it of you; and yet, God knows, if you were to leave me, nothing could compensate for your loss. I cannot help the past, I cannot recall it; you are every thing a woman could desire; I am a weak, self-willed, passionate woman, whom you might well despise; but I cannot blot out my life. Before I knew you, Conrad was the star of my hope. Listen to me, and I will tell you all. *He* was the secret of my attaining to my present position; it was for *him* I worked, and for him that I aspired; when I was a young, friendless girl, *he* stood beside me in my deepest need. Providence, Destiny, or what you will, threw him in my way; he befriended me when I had no other friend, and it is owing to him that I am not a degraded outcast; he helped me to a position in which I could work my own way; he was my benefactor; he gave me books, and showed me the mine of precious things that lies in them. As a young man he showed a noble and generous interest in my fate, and placed me in a regular theatre, where I might rise to a higher grade in my profession; do you wonder that I loved him? Do you wonder that he filled my heart

and soul? I have lived, and grown in my affection for him, till it has become a part of myself. It has been a talisman keeping me from all evil; it has been the secret of my strength. As a young man, of one or two-and-twenty, when I was in a very humble position, shortly after I had entered the regular theatre—fairly started on my career, but had made no way—he would have braved his father's anger, and would have married me. He loved me madly; but, alas! I fear, more from opposition, and the excitement of circumstances, than from a true passion. No matter, *I loved him*, as you love me. I was not what I am now. I felt a consciousness of power within me, but I had achieved nothing; and it would have been suicide in him, dependent as he was on his father, a student in his profession, to have thrown himself away on a sixth-rate actress, however promising she might be. I *refused* him—he knew *why*—he knew my love, for of *that* I made no secret. I told him that I would work my way; and that then, if he pleased, he might claim me. He went abroad, and I remained at home, to work my way up to him. We did not meet again for four years. At first he wrote me letters full of passionate love, but at last they ceased. He gave a prudent reason—that they led to no results, and only unsettled him. He had become prudent, and thought passion a very childish thing. Time passed on, I made a provincial reputation, which is never worth much; but I felt that I had, in some degree, mastered my art, and was fit to appear before a London audience. I came,

and succeeded—he was not in the house! From the theatre,—from those deafening applauses, the wreaths, the acclamations when I was called before the curtain, the summit of my life's endeavours,—I came home. Oh, that night! Well, I can suffer nothing worse. I have felt the worst a human being can endure, and—live. I am convinced people never died under the torture: pain kept them alive. I left the theatre the instant I came off. I could not have remained a moment—I was crushed and suffocated. I came home and flung myself, in my stage dress, just as I was, on the ground; not weeping, but my very heart crumbling away with dry agony—there I lay, all my sorrow crushed down into my soul—so deep, no words nor tears could reach it. After a while, I know not how long, my maid came in laden with the bouquets that had been thrown to me. I rose quite calm and let her undress me. I suppose I must have slept, for I remember nothing, till I saw her at my bedside the next morning, with a heap of newspapers and letters, full of congratulations and praises. I had achieved success—but what was I to do with it? I had never wished it for myself, and to be *alone* at the moment of one's triumph, is more bitter than to be left desolate in one's sorrow. When I got up—I had visitors all day. Nothing but flattery and praise. My despair was in my soul, and had left no traces of its entrance. So I was complimented on my equanimity. They little knew the fearful ballast that kept me down! At night I was to act again. Strange as it may seem,

I was the better for it; I felt as if my profession would not be ungrateful for all the life-blood I had spent upon it.

“That night, when I came off the stage, I found in my dressing-room a note from *him*, asking if he might see me after the play. The distance between our hearts was greater than any that had ever been between our circumstances. *I*, who desired to fling myself into his arms, saying, ‘There, take all my success, all my genius, it is all for *you*—I have worked and succeeded for *you* alone’—felt all my gifts thrown back upon my heart! When I entered the carriage I found him waiting at the door, and he sprang in after me. Oh, how often had I pictured to myself that moment—looked for it, toiled for it—it had been to me a ‘star hanging in darkest night;’—and now I had attained it. He to whom I had given my whole soul was beside me, paying me compliments, saying the most beautiful and graceful things, and in the sweetest voice;—but oh! no genuine tone, not one true word! My god, whom I had adored, had vanished on the moment of becoming visible! Even the friend of my early days was no longer to be discerned;—a gay, graceful man of the world was at my feet! I felt that I had again to subdue him, and I determined I would accomplish it. But, alas! an after-game of love is harder even than an after-game of reputation. I fear I have not succeeded. There is no more to tell you—what I have suffered in hope, fear, and anxiety, is not to be known. I cannot tell what I expect. I am hard, *exigeante*, variable—my

temper is failing under this daily torture—he neither comes on nor goes off; he is jealous if I show any attention to others, but I remember his love of old and cannot be satisfied with his homage now. Oh,” said she, shivering with misery, “I cannot live thus—I must know my fate—I must know his real feelings—I must know the best and the worst. Dear friend, in you, and your clear judgment, I trust to save me from myself. See Conrad, talk to him of me—note his words, his looks, his tones. *You* will not be deceived. Tell me, on your honour, all that passes. If he be trifling with me, I can and will be free from him. I have staked too much, and am worth too much, to flatter his vanity. Let me know how I stand in regard to him; in you I shall have no self-deception to fear. You *will* do this,” said she, beseechingly. “*You* will not abandon me, now that I feel sinking?”

She looked so utterly broken and wretched, the touching tone of her voice altogether unmanned him. At that instant, when no disguise remained, under which hope for himself could linger, he felt that he loved her more madly than ever, and could dedicate his life to watching over her. He rose from the sofa, and walked up and down the room. At last, mastering his emotion by a strong effort, he went up to Bianca, who sat gazing vacantly before her.

“I will do all that you bid me,” said he, in a husky voice. “I will see Conrad to-day. You shall know all.”

"Dear, faithful friend!" murmured Bianca, raising his hand to her parched lips; "God bless you, for all your goodness to me."

He pressed her hand violently to his heart, and abruptly quitted the room.

END OF VOL. I.

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and titles, including the names of the authors and the titles of the works.

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